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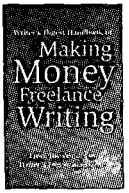

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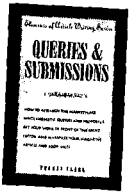

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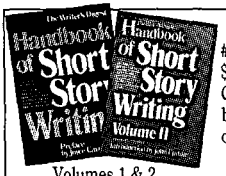

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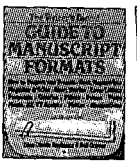

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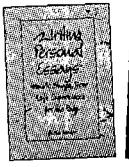

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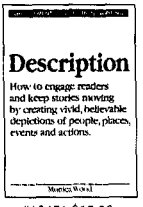
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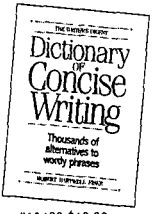

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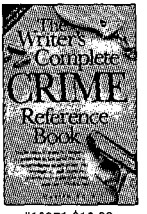

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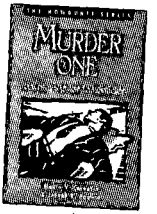

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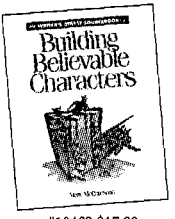

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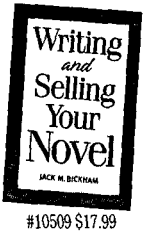

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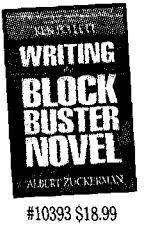

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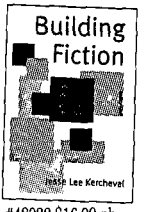

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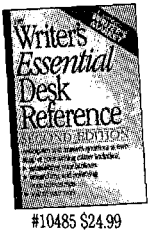

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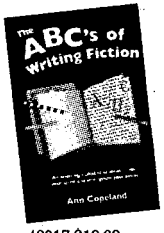

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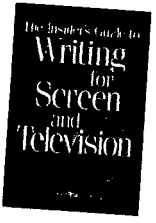

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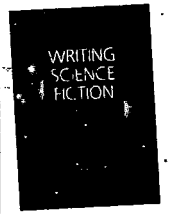

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72

150

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 22 No. 10 (Whole Number 274)
October/November 1998

Next Issue on Sale
October 20, 1998

NOVELLA

172 The Summer Isles — Ian R. MacLeod

NOVELETTES

14 Taklamakan — Bruce Sterling
68 Fall from Grace — Cory Doctorow
102 Waiting for the End — Robert Silverberg
134 The Wreck of the Gladstone — Kage Baker

SHORT STORIES

44 Through the Wall to Eggshell Lake — Danith McPherson
56 Quantum Commode Theory — R. Neube
90 Odd Coupling — Joe Haldeman
150 Whiptail — Robert Reed
164 Binding Energy — Daniel Marcus

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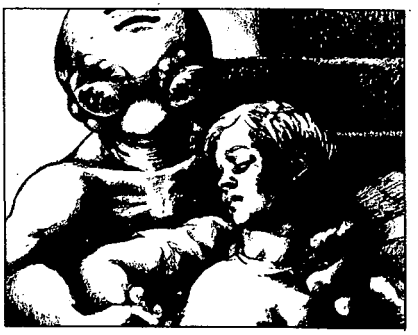

44

POETRY

67 Dad Street — Sara Backer
101 Recipe for a Planck Sandwich — W. Gregory Stewart
149 November — Wendy Rathbone

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: Dem Bones, Dem Bones — Robert Silverberg
8 On the Net: What's New? — James Patrick Kelly
227 On Books — Paul Di Filippo
237 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss
240 Next Issue

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

DEM BONES, DEM BONES

The skull was jutting out of sandy soil along the shore of the Columbia River in the small town of Kennewick, Washington. Two college students wading in the shallows stumbled upon it on a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1996. They called the police.

The county coroner, Floyd Johnson, saw by the bone color that the skull was fairly old. It is not uncommon to come across American Indian remains in that part of the Northwest, and under a Federal law enacted in 1990 any such bones must be turned over to the nearest Indian tribe for reburial. The coroner sent for Dr. James Chatters, a forensic anthropologist who often helped the local authorities identify skeletons. Returning to the site, Johnson and Dr. Chatters found more bones: a nearly complete skeleton, in fact.

Not an Indian's, though. Indian skulls tend to be wide across the cheekbones. This one, long and narrow, with an angular jaw and a prominent chin, was distinctly Caucasoid in appearance. The skeleton was that of a white man, Dr. Chatters concluded, forty-five to fifty years old. Some early settler or fur trapper, perhaps, who had met with an unfortunate riverside accident a couple of hundred years ago.

There was one oddity: embedded in the pelvis was a stone spear point. A souvenir of an old wound, but not a fatal one, for the bone had partly healed and fused around it. "I've got a white guy with a stone point in him," Dr. Chatters declared. "That's pretty exciting. I thought we had a pioneer."

More exciting than he could have imagined. He had a pioneer, all right. Analysis of the spear point showed it to be of a type used by Indians of the Archaic period, forty-five hundred to nine thousand years ago. Mystified, now, Dr. Chatters called in a second anthropologist, Dr. Catherine MacMillan of Central Washington University. She agreed with him that the skeleton was that of a Caucasian male. But how could a white man of the eighteenth or nineteenth century have been carrying a prehistoric weapon point in his pelvis? They decided to send a bone sample to the University of California at Riverside for carbon-14 dating.

The report came back within a few days: the age of the bone was between ninety-three hundred and ninety-six hundred years.

And then, said Dr. Chatters, "It got real ugly real fast."

The classic theory of the peopling of the New World holds that there were no humans of any kind living in North or South America until eleven or twelve thousand years ago, when the ancestors of the modern Indians came out of Asia by way of a land bridge across the Bering Sea that had been temporarily laid bare at the end of the last ice age. Recently, evidence has turned up indicating that the migration out of Asia may have begun as far back as thirty thousand years ago. Even that is only the day before yesterday, so far as the history of human evolution goes.

But it is not easy to consider Kennewick Man, as the new skeleton was already being called, ancestral to the modern-day Indians. They belong to the Mongoloid human stock

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of Northern Asia. Kennewick Man, though he may not have been white-skinned, clearly had European, or perhaps Eurasian, facial characteristics. Suddenly we have been presented with the startling possibility that the Indians were not the only discoverers of America, or even the first people to come here: that emigrants of European stock wandered across the Bering Strait route also, at least nine or ten thousand years ago, possibly much earlier.

Such a discovery, of course, calls for a major scientific reevaluation of all our notions about the settlement of the New World. As a first step, DNA testing of the Kennewick bones would be in order, so that their relationship, if any, to later inhabitants of the New World could be determined.

But before any such studies could begin, two things happened. First, on September 2, 1996—ten days after the fateful carbon-14 date was released—the Army Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over archaeological finds in the area where the bones were found, announced that it was impounding them for possible reburial by the Indians of the vicinity, under the provisions of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, or NAGPRA. The bones were placed under lock and key at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Riceland, Washington.

Then, a week later, the Umatilla Indians of the Columbia River Basin formally claimed the skeleton. It was, they said, that of an ancestor of theirs. "These lands have been used by our tribe since time began," a Umatilla spokesman said. "They can claim that this is a European, but they have no documentation of Europeans living here that goes back that far." As for further DNA testing or additional photographs, none of that would be permitted, for it went against Umatilla beliefs of respect

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for the dead. Whereupon the Army Engineers declared they had no choice but to give the bones over to the Umatillas for reburial within thirty days. "We're not taking sides on this," said a Corps official. "We're just doing what the law says."

A coalition of horrified anthropologists went to court and managed, just eight days before the deadline, to get a stay of the delivery of Kennewick Man's remains to the Umatillas. And since then the bones have been kept under lock and key.

The anthropologists' position is that the Umatillas have no rights to Kennewick Man under NAGPRA, because the physical features of the bones show him to be unrelated to later aboriginal occupants of the Columbia River Basin. This, of course, casts doubt on the Umatillas' claim to him as a tribal ancestor for whom they are entitled to provide ritual burial. And the anthropologists argue that the Kennewick bones are vital to any understanding of the early history of human migration into the New World. Reburying the bones now, which would be tantamount to destroying them, would place them forever beyond the reach of study—a crime against the science of history.

Nonsense, say the Umatillas. "We already know our history," they retorted. "It is passed on to us through our elders and through our religious practices. If this individual is truly over nine thousand years old, that only substantiates the belief that he is Native American. From our oral histories, we know that our people have been part of this land since the beginning of time." As for the reburial issue—a politically charged matter for today's American Indians, who are only too aware that the bones of genuine ancestors of theirs, no more than five or six generations old, have undergone scientific study and even been placed on exhibition in museums—the Umatilla position is that the exhumation and study of such relics is "a desecration of the body and a violation of our most deeply held religious beliefs."

No modern anthropologists would take issue with that. Dr. Chatters, whose own wife is of Native American descent, holds no brief for grave-robbing. (Nevertheless, he has been the recipient of "abusive" and "vitriolic" telephone calls from Umatillas because of his initial participation in the examination of the Kennewick bones, and there has been an apparent attempt by one tribe to induce his clients to boycott his services.) But he does not regard the scientific study of accidentally exhumed nine thousand-year-old remains as any kind of desecration.

What *would* be a desecration, the litigating anthropologists contend, is the destruction of important scientific data for the sake of political correctness. The Umatillas have their oral history, yes. But are we obliged to accept it unquestioningly as accurate, simply because the Indian tribes of this country were so wantonly pushed aside by the expansionist needs of nineteenth-century white Americans? We are in a domain where remorse for past genocidal crimes against the previous occupants of the continent is bumping up against an essentially condescending willingness to commit new crimes, crimes against knowledge, by way of making amends. "The subtly implied message," declares Alan Schneider, the lawyer for the scientists seeking the right to study the Kennewick bones, "is that somehow Native Americans own the history of this country. What's going on here is not a question of whether Native Americans can believe and follow their traditions, but it's a question of whether all of the rest of the country can be required to follow their traditions."

What the Umatillas and associated tribes are really afraid of, I think,

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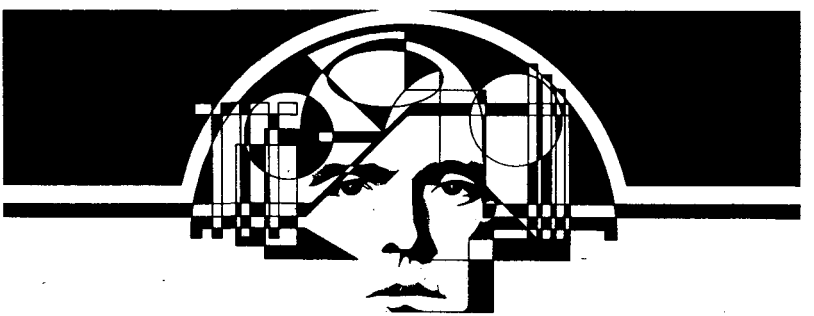
is that "Native Americans," the recent and politically correct term for Indians, will turn out to be more of a misnomer than it already is. *I'm* a native American, after all, born in New York City—but I'm neither an Indian nor a Native American. And if it can be shown that the earliest inhabitants of North America were Eastern European Caucasians, who were pushed aside by later Mongoloids of the "American Indian" type just as the Indians were subsequently pushed aside by white settlers, the genocide issue is somewhat weakened. The Indians' status as victims of the intruding European settlers does not change; but it becomes clear that at one time, too, *they* were the intruders, *they* were the conquerors. And the moral situation is altered.

As for NAGPRA, the ill-conceived law that requires museums to hand century-old collected specimens back to the Indian tribes and tacitly encourages the quiet destruction of new finds made in the course of routine real-estate development, it seems to be a double-edged sword. A few months ago, the Asatru, a California pagan sect that worships the ancient Norse gods, filed suit against the Army Engineers too. The Asatru asserted that Kennewick Man, because he was a Caucasoid, might just be one of *their* ancestors, and demanded the right to hold their own religious ceremony over the bones, as the Indians recently had done. This was granted; and the Asatru then protested that cedar leaves placed in the skeleton's box by the Indians might damage the remains. So a new legal hassle has broken forth here.

Myself, I very much doubt that the precursors of Odin and Thor were worshipped in North America ninety centuries ago. But anything that keeps the Kennewick bones from going back into the ground unstudied is okay by me, however fanciful it may be. O

Robert Silverberg's collection of essays, *Reflections and Refractions* (Underwood, 1997) has been nominated for a Best Nonfiction Hugo. About half of the collection's material was originally published in *Asimov's*.



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Chat with **Gardner Dozois**, Wednesday, September 23, 1998 and **Geoffrey A. Landis**, Monday, October 12, 1998. Both chats will be at 9:00 PM (EST)

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

WHAT'S NEW?

Hackerspeak

So now we're on the web along with Cub Scouts, cheerleaders, postal workers, a gajillion other science fiction fans, and Al Gore. That must mean we're cutting edge, right? Maybe even *bleeding* edge. You know, some netizens claim that everything here is so new that we need to coin an entire vocabulary to describe it. In fact, they've already begun without us. Consider these important questions:

—If a mudhead accuses you of wibbling, WTHDTM?

—Should you flame a spod who says your homepage is angry fruit salad?

—Would you say your browser is cuspy or crufty? How about your wife?

—Does anyone really LOL on IRC, much less ROTFL?

What, not fluent in Hackerspeak? Then check out **The Jargon Dictionary** (*www.netmeg.net/jargon*). If the linguists are right and we can think only what we can say, then here's a fascinating peek into the minds of the secret masters who actually run this show. Even though you may not always understand or agree with them, you'll be intrigued by the way their wetware works.

But frankly, I'm not sure there's that much that's really new on the web, at least when it comes to science fiction. When I peer into my monitor, what I see looks more like a Goodwill store than the Gap. Most of the merchandise has been around for a while. Some of it is worn but still serviceable; every so often you come across a real find. Here are some classics, twenty years old but still in fashion. Sure, the lapels on the blazers on that rack are too wide and the blouses in this bin are all last season's colors. But hey, check out these ties. They're so ugly that they pass right through bad taste into cool. Just right for the upcoming **WorldCon** (*www.aussiecon3.worldcon.org*)!

No, edge-seekers, most of what is on the web is the same old stuff. What's new is the packaging. Take, for example, books.

Cracking the Books

In the beginning, there was the neighborhood bookstore. It was and is run by people who love books. They're eager to recommend new authors or discuss that page-turner you bought last week. It's a good thing to buy books from your neighborhood bookstore.

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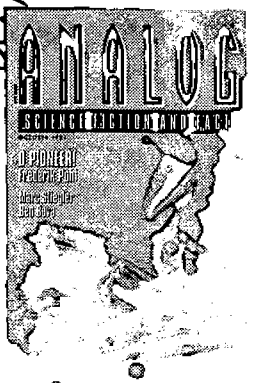

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Most book buyers shop Amazon or BarnesandNoble for their selection and price. The selection *is* unparalleled—basically, if it's in print, these businesses will sell it to you. Price is more problematic. Yes, there is a discount, but the buyer must also bear the cost of shipping and handling. In some cases, the book you buy from Amazon.com will cost about the same as the book you buy from the Corner Bookstore.

As markets on the web mature, they seem to generate price search engines. Cyberbookselling has one called **Acses** *(www.acses.com)*. Type in the title of any book or any author on the Acses index page and it will consult twenty-five on-line bookstores, among them Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble. Acses then generates a table on which you can see the actual prices, including shipping and handling, for your selection from each vendor. Click on the cheapest one—usually well under the cover price—and Acses sends you to the vendor site to complete the transaction.

I'm no economist, but this looks to me like the beginning of the end of bookselling as we know it. At very least, Acses ought to scare the Book of the Month Club witless. If you're going to wait for your new book anyway, why pay list?

By the way, there's a similar price search engine for computers and peripherals at **Netbuyer** (*www.netbuyer.com*) in case you're ready to upgrade to that hot new modem.

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The 'Zine Scene

Project Gutenberg may offer a glimpse into the future of book publishing. If there were a readable, portable, and cheap gizmo that could

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display etexts, then Project Gutenberg would be the library you always wanted but could never afford. But there isn't any such gizmo—yet. Although the web is affecting the way you buy them, it hasn't changed the nature of books themselves. Books are still treeware.

Magazines are a different story. For all the complaining people do about reading text from monitors, in moderate doses it's no strain at all. Print 'zines map fairly well onto the web; they don't call these *pages* for nothing. In fact, a properly designed webzine offers certain improvements over print. Thus it's not really a surprise that we've seen **Omni** (*www.omnimag.com*) and **Tomorrow** (*www.tomorrowsf.com*) migrate entirely onto the web, although many saw their departures as a blow to the genre. Does *Omni* have fewer readers now than it did when it was available on the newsstand? Sure. Is it less influential than it used to be? Perhaps. Will that be true five years from now? Who knows? [Editor's note: On April 30, 1998, *Omni* laid off all staff and ceased posting new content.]

Meanwhile other magazines have taken more measured steps into cyberspace, including, of course, **Asimov's** (*www.Asimov's.com*) and **Analog** (*www.Analog.com*). The challenge for a magazine like *Asimov's* is to strike a balance between its web and print incarnations. Gardner and Sheila want to make it worth your while to stop by the website without dampening your enthusiasm for print version, which is still where their hearts are.

Different magazines are pursuing different strategies in striking that balance. Charles N. Brown's *Locus* has been an irreplaceable resource for fans and pros ever since I was a wannabe writer back in the Nixon administration. It offers news, reviews, interviews, convention listings and reports, publishers' schedules. Simply put, if you want to know what's going on in science fiction, you have to read *Locus*. **Locus** (*www.locusmag.com*) has been on the web less than a year as I write this, but under webmaster Mark Kelly, it has come on fast. Here you'll get breaking news and convention listings and interviews and some, but not all, reviews. In addition, there are assorted link pages, many with commentary, and a column called Aether Vibrations—notes on science, fiction, and points in between—which may well be my favorite part of the site. As a matter of fact, the *Locus* webzine reproduces so much of print *Locus* that I wonder whether it might not soon be competing with its parent, at least among the webheads. It's one of the few genre sites I'd be willing to pay to get access to. Luckily for us, admission is free.

Mark Kelly, by the way, in addition to being the maximum commander of the *Locus* website, is also the long time short fiction reviewer for the print version of *Locus*. His regular *Distillations* column is one of the things missing from the website, which is bad news for short fiction fans like you and me. The good news is that they are reproduced on Mark's personal page **Mark R Kelly's CServe Web Page** (*http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/mrkelly*). It also has a database of SF awards with some quirky tallies and stats that I found a hoot. It's well worth the side trip.

While the web presents commercial magazines with both hazards and opportunities, going online is a no-brainer for fanzines. Take, for example, **Ansible** (*www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/Ansible/Ansible.html*). If you've been to a Hugo ceremony at the WorldCon in the last decade, you've no doubt heard the name Dave Langford called out from the stage.

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The man has earned a fleet of little silver rockets for his work in *Ansible,* which has made a nimble transition from print to the web. Not only is the entire run of back issues archived on the website but you can sign up to have forthcoming issues delivered directly to your computer via email. For free—and worth every penny! *Ansible* is sort of like the *Reader's Digest* version of *Locus,* written by Oscar Wilde. One regular feature is the feared Thog's Masterclass, in which Thog and his intrepid minions present howlers that have appeared in allegedly edited works of fiction. Here, have a taste:

Dept of Authors Who Should Perhaps Find a New Butcher: "They'd see the way that some of their husbands twitched into life like dead meat when introduced into her company." Stephen Gallagher, *Red, Red Robin,* 1995. *Dept of Gourmet Thrills:* "His lips were on hers, pressing so hard she could feel the teeth beneath. His tongue followed after. Thin and dry and tough as old leather, it bore the vestiges of his last meal on its length." J.V. Jones, *Master and Fool,* 1997.

Dinosauria

I like dinosaurs. Dinosaurs have been good to me. There are lots of great dino sites on the web, but my pick of the moment is the **Parasaurolophus Sound Home Page** (*www.nmmnh-abq.mus.nm.us/nm mnh/parasound.html*). This is part of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science's website. You see, there are these two scientists and they . . . well, let their press release take up the tale. "Dr. Carl Diegert of Sandia National Lab and Dr. Tom Williamson of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science in Albuquerque have explored in unprecedented detail and accuracy the potential sound-making ability of the duck-billed dinosaur Parasaurolophus. The results of their efforts were revealed at a news conference at the Museum on December 5, 1997, when a computer generated a sound said to be similar to one the dinosaur could have made 75 million years ago." That's right, you can listen to dinosaur calls on the internet! They reminded me a little of whale songs, but my wife Pam, who was listening in the next room, thought they sounded like foghorns.

Another dinosaur—at least, metaphorically speaking—that has found a new voice on the web is radio drama. From the 1930s through the 1950s, radio plays ruled the airwaves. **Seeing Ear Theatre** (*www.scifi.com/set*), part of the SciFi Channel's Dominion website, offers classic radio dramas to anyone whose browser can accept the RealAudio plugin. You can login to Aldous Huxley narrating an adaptation of "Brave New World." Or thrill to Orson Welles in "The Hitchhiker," which was later remade as a *Twilight Zone* episode. Seeing Ear Theater is also busily producing new radio plays, many adapted from stories that have appeared in the pages of this magazine. As I write this, the Hugo-winning "The Death of Captain Future" by Allen Steele has just debuted, starring Marina Sirtis from *Star Trek.* Upcoming is work from Pat Cadigan, John Kessel, and Terry Bisson. In the interest of full and complete disclosure, I should warn you that there's a dinosaur of my own on the Seeing Ear Theater site.

But don't hold that against them.

Exit

So what's new on the web? Dinosaurs, Jules Verne and radio plays. You can't have a future without a past.

Comments about this arthicle can be emailed to *asimovs@erols.com* or flamed directly to the author at *jimkelly@nh.ultranet.com.* O

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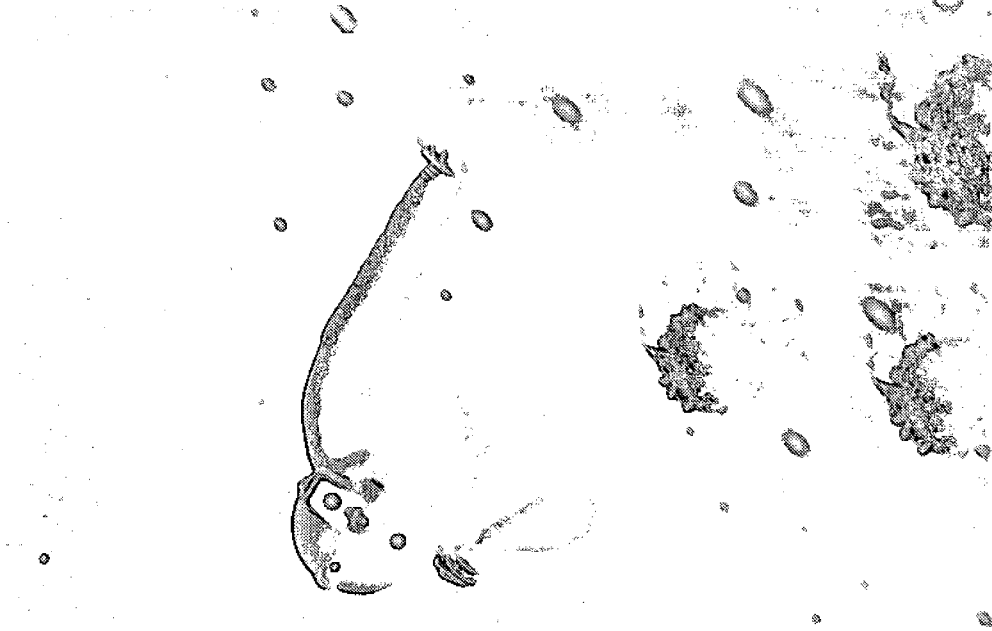
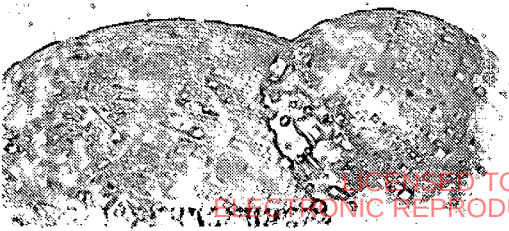


Bruce Sterling

TAKLAMAKAN

Bruce Sterling tells us, "This is the third, and the longest, and certainly the weirdest, story in the 'Chattanooga series.' No kidding, down-and-dirty in-your-face genre SF, this baby features oodles of starships and robots, as well as the standard Chattanooga-style cybergizmos, sports freaks, neuters, spies, and anarchists." The first two stories in the series were "Deep Eddy" (*Asimov's*, August 1993) and the Hugo-award-winning "Bicycle Repairman" (*Asimov's*, October 1996). Mr. Sterling's latest projects include *Wired* magazine's July cover story, "The Spirit of Mega," and an SF political thriller, *Distraction*, that will be out soon from Bantam.

Illustration by Alan Giana



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A bone-dry frozen wind tore at the earth outside, its lethal howling cut to a muffled moan. Katrinko and Spider Pete were camped deep in a crevice in the rock, wrapped in furry darkness. Pete could hear Katrinko breathing, with a light rattle of chattering teeth. The neuter's yeasty armpits smelled like nutmeg.

Spider Pete strapped his shaven head into his spex.

Outside their puffy nest, the sticky eyes of a dozen gelcams splayed across the rock, a sky-eating web of perception. Pete touched a stud on his spex, pulled down a glowing menu, and adjusted his visual take on the outside world.

Flying powder tumbled through the yardangs like an evil fog. The crescent moon and a billion desert stars, glowing like pixelated bruises, wheeled above the eerie wind-sculpted landscape of the Taklamakan. With the exceptions of Antarctica, or maybe the deep Sahara—locales Pete had never been paid to visit—this central Asian desert was the loneliest, most desolate place on Earth.

Pete adjusted parameters, etching the landscape with a busy array of false colors. He recorded an artful series of panorama shots, and tagged a global positioning fix onto the captured stack. Then he signed the footage with a cryptographic time-stamp from a passing NAFTA spy-sat.

1/15/2052 05:24:01.

Pete saved the stack onto a gelbrain. This gelbrain was a walnut-sized lump of neural biotech, carefully grown to mimic the razor-sharp visual cortex of an American bald eagle. It was the best, most expensive piece of photographic hardware that Pete had ever owned. Pete kept the thing tucked in his crotch.

Pete took a deep and intimate pleasure in working with the latest federally subsidized spy gear. It was quite the privilege for Spider Pete, the kind of privilege that he might well die for. There was no tactical use in yet another spy-shot of the chill and empty Taklamakan. But the tagged picture would prove that Katrinko and Pete had been here at the appointed rendezvous. Right here, right now. Waiting for the man.

And the man was overdue.

During their brief professional acquaintance, Spider Pete had met the Lieutenant Colonel in a number of deeply unlikely locales. A parking garage in Pentagon City. An outdoor seafood restaurant in Cabo San Lucas. On the ferry to Staten Island. Pete had never known his patron to miss a rendezvous by so much as a microsecond.

The sky went dirty white. A sizzle, a sparkle, a zenith full of stink. A screaming-streaking-tumbling. A nasty thunderclap. The ground shook hard.

"Dang," Pete said.

They found the Lieutenant Colonel just before eight in the morning. Pieces of his landing pod were violently scattered across half a kilometer.

Katrinko and Pete skulked expertly through a dirty yellow jumble of wind-grooved boulders. Their camou gear switched coloration moment by moment, to match the landscape and the incidental light.

Pete pried the mask from his face, inhaled the thin, pitiless, metallic air, and spoke aloud. "That's our boy all right. Never missed a date."

The neuter removed her mask and fastidiously smeared her lips and gums with silicone anti-evaporant. Her voice fluted eerily over the insistent wind. "Space-defense must have tracked him on radar."

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"Nope. If they'd hit him from orbit, he'd really be spread all over. . . . No, something happened to him really close to the ground." Pete pointed at a violent scattering of cracked ochre rock. "See, check out how that stealth-pod hit and tumbled. It didn't catch fire till after the impact."

With the absent ease of a gecko, the neuter swarmed up a three-story-high boulder. She examined the surrounding forensic evidence at length, dabbing carefully at her spex controls. She then slithered deftly back to earth. "There was no anti-aircraft fire, right? No interceptors flyin' round last night."

"Nope. Heck, there's no people around here in a space bigger than Delaware."

The neuter looked up. "So what do you figure, Pete?"

"I figure an accident," said Pete.

"A what?"

"An accident. A lot can go wrong with a covert HALO insertion."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Well, G-loads and stuff. System malfunctions. Maybe he just blacked out."

"He was a federal military spook, and you're telling me he *passed out?*" Katrinko daintily adjusted her goggled spex with gloved and bulbous fingertips. "Why would that matter anyway? He wouldn't fly a spacecraft with his own hands, would he?"

Pete rubbed at the gummy line of his mask, easing the prickly indentation across one dark, tattooed cheek. "I kinda figure he would, actually. The man was a pilot. Big military prestige thing. Flyin' in by hand, deep in Sphere territory, covert insertion, way behind enemy lines. . . . That'd really be something to brag about, back on the Potomac."

The neuter considered this sour news without apparent resentment. As one of the world's top technical climbers, Katrinko was a great connoisseur of pointless displays of dangerous physical skill. "I can get behind that." She paused. "Serious bad break, though."

They resealed their masks. Water was their greatest lack, and vapor exhalation was a problem. They were recycling body-water inside their suits, topped off with a few extra cc's they'd obtained from occasional patches of frost. They'd consumed the last of the trail-goop and candy from their glider shipment three long days ago. They hadn't eaten since. Still, Pete and Katrinko were getting along pretty well, living off big subcutaneous lumps of injected body fat.

More through habit than apparent need, Pete and Katrinko segued into evidence-removal mode. It wasn't hard to conceal a HALO stealth pod. The spycraft was radar-transparent and totally biodegradable. In the bitter wind and cold of the Taklamakan, the bigger chunks of wreckage had already gone all brown and crispy, like the shed husks of locusts. They couldn't scrape up every physical trace, but they'd surely get enough to fool aerial surveillance.

The Lieutenant Colonel was extremely dead. He'd come down from the heavens in his full NAFTA military power-armor, a leaping, brick-busting, lightning-spewing exoskeleton, all acronyms and input jacks. It was powerful, elaborate gear, of an entirely different order than the gooey and fibrous street tech of the two urban intrusion freaks.

But the high-impact crash had not been kind to the armored suit. It had been crueler still to the bone, blood, and tendon housed inside.

Pete bagged the larger pieces with a heavy heart. He knew that the Lieutenant Colonel was basically no good: deceitful, ruthlessly ambitious, probably crazy. Still, Pete sincerely regretted his employer's demise. After all, it

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was precisely those qualities that had led the Lieutenant Colonel to recruit Spider Pete in the first place.

Pete also felt sincere regret for the gung-ho, clear-eyed young military widow, and the two little redheaded kids in Augusta, Georgia. He'd never actually met the widow or the little kids, but the Lieutenant Colonel was always fussing about them and showing off their photos. The Lieutenant Colonel had been a full fifteen years younger than Spider Pete, a rosy-cheeked cracker kid really, never happier than when handing over wads of money, nutty orders, and expensive covert equipment to people whom no sane man would trust with a burnt-out match. And now here he was in the cold and empty heart of Asia, turned to jam within his shards of junk.

Katrinko did the last of the search-and-retrieval while Pete dug beneath a ledge with his diamond hand-pick, the razored edges slashing out clods of shale.

After she'd fetched the last blackened chunk of their employer, Katrinko perched birdlike on a nearby rock. She thoughtfully nibbled a piece of the pod's navigation console. "This gelbrain is good when it dries out, man. Like trail mix, or a fortune cookie."

Pete grunted. "You might be eating part of *him,* y'know."

"Lotta good carbs and protein there, too."

They stuffed a final shattered power-jackboot inside the Colonel's makeshift cairn. The piled rock was there for the ages. A few jets of webbing and thumbnail dabs of epoxy made it harder than a brick wall.

It was noon now, still well below freezing, but as warm as the Taklamakan was likely to get in January. Pete sighed, dusted sand from his knees and elbows, stretched. It was hard work, cleaning up; the hardest part of intrusion work, because it was the stuff you had to do after the thrill was gone. He offered Katrinko the end of a fiber-optic cable, so that they could speak together without using radio or removing their masks.

Pete waited until she had linked in, then spoke into his mike. "So we head on back to the glider now, right?"

The neuter looked up, surprised. "How come?"

"Look, Trink, this guy that we just buried was the actual spy in this assignment. You and me, we were just his gophers and backup support. The mission's an abort."

"But we're searching for a giant, secret, rocket base."

"Yeah, sure we are."

"We're supposed to find this monster high-tech complex, break in, and record all kinds of crazy top secrets that nobody but the mandarins have ever seen. That's a totally hot assignment, man."

Pete sighed. "I admit it's very high-concept, but I'm an old guy now, Trink. I need the kind of payoff that involves some actual money."

Katrinko laughed. "But Pete! It's a *starship!* A whole fleet of 'em, maybe! Secretly built in the desert, by Chinese spooks and Japanese engineers!"

Pete shook his head. "That was all paranoid bullshit that the flyboy made up, to get himself a grant and a field assignment. He was tired of sitting behind a desk in the basement, that's all."

Katrinko folded her lithe and wiry arms. "Look, Pete, you saw those briefings just like me. You saw all those satellite shots. The traffic analysis, too. The Sphere people are up to something way big out here."

Pete gazed around him. He found it painfully surreal to endure this discussion amid a vast and threatening tableau of dust-hazed sky and sand-

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etched mudstone gullies. "They built something big here once, I grant you that. But I never figured the Colonel's story for being very likely."

"What's so unlikely about it? The Russians had a secret rocket base in the desert a hundred years ago. American deserts are full of secret mil-spec stuff and space-launch bases. So now the Asian Sphere people are up to the same old game. It all makes sense."

"No, it makes no sense at all. Nobody's space-racing to build any starships. Starships aren't a space race. It takes four hundred years to fly to the stars. Nobody's gonna finance a major military project that'll take four hundred years to pay off. Least of all a bunch of smart and thrifty Asian economic-warfare people."

"Well, they're sure building *something*. Look, all we have to do is find the complex, break in, and document some stuff. We can do that! People like us, we never needed any federal bossman to help us break into buildings and take photos. That's what we always do, that's what we live for."

Pete was touched by the kid's game spirit. She really had the City Spider way of mind. Nevertheless, Pete was fifty-two years old, so he found it necessary to at least try to be reasonable. "We should haul our sorry spook asses back to that glider right now. Let's skip on back over the Himalayas. We can fly on back to Washington, tourist class out of Delhi. They'll debrief us at the puzzle-palace. We'll give 'em the bad news about the bossman. We got plenty of evidence to prove *that,* anyhow. . . . The spooks will give us some walkin' money for a busted job, and tell us to keep our noses clean. Then we can go out for some pork chops."

Katrinko's thin shoulders hunched mulishly within the bubblepak warts of her insulated camou. She was not taking this at all well. "Peter, I ain't looking for pork chops. I'm looking for some professional validation, okay? I'm sick of that lowlife kid stuff, knocking around raiding network sites and mayors' offices. . . . This is my chance at the big-time!"

Pete stroked the muzzle of his mask with two gloved fingers.

"Pete, I know that you ain't happy. I know that already, okay? But you've *already made it* in the big-time, Mr. City Spider, Mr. Legend, Mr. Champion. Now here's my big chance come along, and you want us to hang up our cleats."

Pete raised his other hand. "Wait a minute, I never said that."

"Well, you're tellin' me you're walking. You're turning your back. You don't even want to check it out first."

"No," Pete said weightily, "I reckon you know me too well for that, Trink. I'm still a Spider. I'm still game. I'll always at least check it out."

Katrinko set their pace after that. Pete was content to let her lead. It was a very stupid idea to continue the mission without the overlordship of the Lieutenant Colonel. But it was stupid in a different and more refreshing way than the stupid idea of returning home to Chattanooga.

People in Pete's line of work weren't allowed to go home. He'd tried that once, really tried it, eight years ago, just after that badly busted caper in Brussels. He'd gotten a straight job at Lyle Schweik's pedal-powered aircraft factory. The millionaire sports tycoon had owed him a favor. Schweik had been pretty good about it, considering.

But word had swiftly gotten around that Pete had once been a champion City Spider. Dumb-ass co-workers would make significant remarks. Sometimes they asked him for so-called "favors," or tried to act street-wise. When you came down to it, straight people were a major pain in the ass.

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Pete preferred the company of seriously twisted people. People who really cared about something, cared enough about it to really warp themselves for it. People who looked for more out of life than mommy-daddy, money, and the grave.

Below the edge of a ridgeline they paused for a recce. Pete whirled a tethered eye on the end of its reel and flung it. At the peak of its arc, six stories up, it recorded their surroundings in a panoramic view.

Pete and Katrinko studied the image together through their linked spex. Katrinko highlit an area downhill with a fingertip gesture. "Now there's a tipoff."

"That gully, you mean?"

"You need to get outdoors more, Pete. That's what we rockjocks technically call a road."

Pete and Katrinko approached the road with professional caution. It was a paved ribbon of macerated cinderblock, overrun with drifting sand. The road was made of the coked-out clinker left behind by big urban incinerators, a substance that Asians used for their road surfaces because all the value had been cooked out of it.

The cinder road had once seen a great deal of traffic. There were tire-shreds here and there, deep ruts in the shoulder, and post-holes that had once been traffic signs, or maybe surveillance boxes.

They followed the road from a respectful distance, cautious of monitors, tripwires, landmines, and many other possible unpleasantries. They stopped for a rest in a savage arroyo where a road bridge had been carefully removed, leaving only neat sockets in the roadbed and a kind of conceptual arc in midair.

"What creeps me out is how clean this all is," Pete said over cable. "It's a road, right? Somebody's gotta throw out a beer can, a lost shoe, something."

Katrinko nodded. "I figure construction robots."

"Really."

Katrinko spread her swollen-fingered gloves. "It's a Sphere operation, so it's bound to have lots of robots, right? I figure robots built this road. Robots used this road. Robots carried in tons and tons of whatever they were carrying. Then when they were done with the big project, the robots carried off everything that was worth any money. Gathered up the guideposts, bridges, everything. Very neat, no loose ends, very Sphere-type way to work." Katrinko set her masked chin on her bent knees, gone into reverie. "Some very weird and intense stuff can happen, when you got a lot of space in the desert, and robot labor that's too cheap to meter."

Katrinko hadn't been wasting her time in those intelligence briefings. Pete had seen a lot of City Spider wannabes, even trained quite a few of them. But Katrinko had what it took to be a genuine Spider champion: the desire, the physical talent, the ruthless dedication, and even the smarts. It was staying out of jails and morgues that was gonna be the tough part for Katrinko. "You're a big fan of the Sphere, aren't you, kid? You really like the way they operate."

"Sure, I always liked Asians. Their food's a lot better than Europe's."

Pete took this in stride. NAFTA, Sphere, and Europe: the trilateral superpowers jostled about with the uneasy regularity of sunspots, periodically brewing storms in the proxy regimes of the South. During his fifty-plus years, Pete had seen the Asian Cooperation Sphere change its public image repeatedly, in a weird political rhythm. Exotic vacation spot on Tuesdays and

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Thursdays. Baffling alien threat on Mondays and Wednesdays. Major trading partner each day and every day, including weekends and holidays.

At the current political moment, the Asian Cooperation Sphere was deep into its Inscrutable Menace mode, logging lots of grim media coverage as NAFTA's chief economic adversary. As far as Pete could figure it, this basically meant that a big crowd of goofy North American economists were trying to act really macho. Their major complaint was that the Sphere was selling NAFTA too many neat, cheap, well-made consumer goods. That was an extremely silly thing to get killed about. But people perished horribly for much stranger reasons than that.

At sunset, Pete and Katrinko discovered the giant warning signs. They were titanic vertical plinths, all epoxy and clinker, much harder than granite. They were four stories tall, carefully rooted in bedrock, and painstakingly chiseled with menacing horned symbols and elaborate textual warnings in at least fifty different languages. English was language number three.

"Radiation waste," Pete concluded, deftly reading the text through his spex, from two kilometers away. "This is a radiation waste dump. Plus, a nuclear test site. Old Red Chinese hydrogen bombs, way out in the Taklamakan desert." He paused thoughtfully. "You gotta hand it to 'em. They sure picked the right spot for the job."

"No way!" Katrinko protested. "Giant stone warning signs, telling people not to trespass in this area? That's got to be a con-job."

"Well, it would sure account for them using robots, and then destroying all the roads."

"No, man. It's like—you wanna hide something big nowadays. You don't put a safe inside the wall any more, because hey, everybody's got magnetometers and sonic imaging and heat detection. So you hide your best stuff in the garbage."

Pete scanned their surroundings on spex telephoto. They were lurking on a hillside above a playa, where the occasional gullywasher had spewed out a big alluvial fan of desert-varnished grit and cobbles. Stuff was actually growing down there—squat leathery grasses with fat waxy blades like dead men's fingers. The evil vegetation didn't look like any kind of grass that Pete had ever seen. It struck him as the kind of grass that would blithely gobble up stray plutonium. "Trink, I like my explanations simple. I figure that so-called giant starship base for a giant radwaste dump."

"Well, maybe," the neuter admitted. "But even if that's the truth, that's still news worth paying for. We might find some busted-up barrels, or some badly managed fuel rods out there. That would be a big political embarrassment, right? Proof of that would be worth something."

"Huh," said Pete, surprised. But it was true. Long experience had taught Pete that there were always useful secrets in other people's trash. "Is it worth glowin' in the dark for?"

"So what's the problem?" Katrinko said. "I ain't having kids. I fixed that a long time ago. And you've got enough kids already."

"Maybe," Pete grumbled. Four kids by three different women. It had taken him a long sad time to learn that women who fell head-over-heels for footloose, sexy tough guys would fall repeatedly for pretty much *any* footloose, sexy tough guy.

Katrinko was warming to the task at hand. "We can do this, man. We got our suits and our breathing masks, and we're not eating or drinking any-

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thing out here, so we're practically radiation-tight. So we camp way outside the dump tonight. Then before dawn we slip in, we check it out real quick, we take our pictures, we leave. Clean, classic intrusion job. Nobody living around here to stop us, no problem there. And then, we got something to show the spooks when we get home. Maybe something we can sell."

Pete mulled this over. The prospect didn't sound all that bad. It was dirty work, but it would complete the mission. Also—this was the part he liked best—it would keep the Lieutenant Colonel's people from sending in some other poor guy. "Then, back to the glider?"

"Then back to the glider."

"Okay, good deal."

Before dawn the next morning, they stoked themselves with athletic performance enhancers, brewed in the guts of certain gene-spliced ticks that they had kept hibernating in their armpits. Then they concealed their travel gear, and swarmed like ghosts up and over the great wall.

They pierced a tiny hole through the roof of one of the duncolored, half-buried containment hangars, and oozed a spy-eye through.

Bombproofed ranks of barrel-shaped sarcophagi, solid and glossy as polished granite. The big fused radwaste containers were each the size of a tanker truck. They sat there neatly ranked in hermetic darkness, mute as sphinxes. They looked to be good for the next twenty thousand years.

Pete liquefied and retrieved the gelcam, then re-sealed the tiny hole with rock putty. They skipped down the slope of the dusty roof. There were lots of lizard tracks in the sand drifts, piled at the rim of the dome. These healthy traces of lizard cheered Pete up considerably.

They swarmed silently up and over the wall. Back uphill to the grotto where they'd stashed their gear. Then they removed their masks to talk again.

Pete sat behind a boulder, enjoying the intrusion after-glow. "A cakewalk," he pronounced it. "A pleasure hike." His pulse was already normal again, and, to his joy, there were no suspicious aches under his caraco-acromial arch.

"You gotta give them credit, those robots sure work neat."

Pete nodded. "Killer application for robots, your basic lethal waste gig."

"I telephoto'ed that whole cantonment," said Katrinko, "and there's no water there. No towers, no plumbing, no wells. People can get along without a lot of stuff in the desert, but nobody lives without water. That place is stone dead. It was always dead." She paused. "It was all automated robot work from start to finish. You know what that means, Pete? It means no human being has ever seen that place before. Except for you and me."

"Hey, then it's a first! We scored a first intrusion! That's just dandy," said Pete, pleased at the professional coup. He gazed across the cobbled plain at the walled cantonment, and pressed a last set of spex shots into his gelbrain archive. Two dozen enormous domes, built block by block by giant robots, acting with the dumb persistence of termites. The sprawling domes looked as if they'd congealed on the spot, their rims settling like molten taffy into the desert's little convexities and concavities. From a satellite view, the domes probably passed for natural features. "Let's not tarry, okay? I can kinda feel those X-ray fingers kinking my DNA."

"Aw, you're not all worried about that, are you, Pete?"

Pete laughed and shrugged. "Who cares? Job's over, kid. Back to the glider."

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"They do great stuff with gene damage nowadays, y'know. Kinda re-weave you, down at the spook lab."

"What, those military doctors? I don't wanna give them the excuse."

The wind picked up. A series of abrupt and brutal gusts. Dry, and freezing, and peppered with stinging sand.

Suddenly, a faint moan emanated from the cantonment. Distant lungs blowing the neck of a wine bottle.

"What's that big weird noise?" demanded Katrinko, all alert interest.

"Aw no," said Pete. "Dang."

Steam was venting from a hole in the bottom of the thirteenth dome. They'd missed the hole earlier, because the rim of that dome was overgrown with big thriving thornbushes. The bushes would have been a tip-off in themselves, if the two of them had been feeling properly suspicious.

In the immediate area, Pete and Katrinko swiftly discovered three dead men. The three men had hacked and chiseled their way through the containment dome—from the inside. They had wriggled through the long, narrow crevice they had cut, leaving much blood and skin.

The first man had died just outside the dome, apparently from sheer exhaustion. After their Olympian effort, the two survivors had emerged to confront the sheer four-story walls.

The remaining men had tried to climb the mighty wall with their handaxes, crude woven ropes, and pig-iron pitons. It was a nothing wall for a pair of City Spiders with modern handwebs and pinpression cleats. Pete and Katrinko could have camped and eaten a watermelon on that wall. But it was a very serious wall for a pair of very weary men dressed in wool, leather, and homemade shoes.

One of them had fallen from the wall, and had broken his back and leg. The last one had decided to stay to comfort his dying comrade, and it seemed he had frozen to death.

The three men had been dead for many months, maybe over a year. Ants had been at work on them, and the fine salty dust of the Taklamakan, and the freeze-drying. Three desiccated Asian mummies, black hair and crooked teeth and wrinkled dusky skin, in their funny bloodstained clothes.

Katrinko offered the cable lead, chattering through her mask. "Man, look at these *shoes!* Look at this shirt this guy's got—would you call this thing a *shirt?*"

"What I would call this is three very brave climbers," Pete said. He tossed a tethered eye into the crevice that the men had cut.

The inside of the thirteenth dome was a giant forest of monitors. Microwave antennas, mostly. The top of the dome wasn't sturdy sintered concrete like the others, it was some kind of radar-transparent plastic. Dark inside, like the other domes, and hermetically sealed—at least before the dead men had chewed and chopped their hole through the wall. No sign of any radwaste around here.

They discovered the little camp where the men had lived. Their bivouac. Three men, patiently chipping and chopping their way to freedom. Burning their last wicks and oil lamps, eating their last rations bite by bite, emptying their leather canteens and scraping for frost to drink. Surrounded all the time by a towering jungle of satellite relays and wavepipes. Pete found that scene very ugly. That was a very bad scene. That was the worst of it yet.

* * *

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Pete and Katrinko retrieved their full set of intrusion gear. They then broke in through the top of the dome, where the cutting was easiest. Once through, they sealed the hole behind themselves, but only lightly, in case they should need a rapid retreat. They lowered their haul bags to the stone floor, then rappelled down on their smart ropes. Once on ground level, they closed the escape tunnel with web and rubble, to stop the howling wind, and to keep contaminants at bay.

With the hole sealed, it grew warmer in the dome. Warm, and moist. Dew was collecting on walls and floor. A very strange smell, too. A smell like smoke and old socks. Mice and spice. Soup and sewage. A cozy human reek from the depths of the earth.

"The Lieutenant Colonel sure woulda have loved this," whispered Katrinko over cable, spexing out the towering machinery with her infrareds. "You put a clip of explosive ammo through here, and it sure would put a major crimp in somebody's automated gizmos."

Pete figured their present situation for an excellent chance to get killed. Automated alarm systems were the deadliest aspect of his professional existence, somewhat tempered by the fact that smart and aggressive alarm systems frequently killed their owners. There was a basic engineering principle involved. Fancy, paranoid alarm systems went false-positive all the time: squirrels, dogs, wind, hail, earth tremors, horny boyfriends who forgot the password. . . . They were smart, and they had their own agenda, and it made them troublesome.

But if these machines were alarms, then they hadn't noticed a rather large hole painstakingly chopped in the side of their dome. The spars and transmitters looked bad, all patchy with long-accumulated rime and ice. A junkyard look, the definite smell of dead tech. So somebody had given up on these smart, expensive, paranoid alarms. Someone had gotten sick and tired of them, and shut them off.

At the foot of a microwave tower, they found a rat-sized manhole chipped out, covered with a laced-down lid of sheep's hide. Pete dropped a spy-eye down, scoping out a machine-drilled shaft. The tunnel was wide enough to swallow a car, and it dropped down as straight as a plumb bob for farther than his eye's wiring could reach.

Pete silently yanked a rusting pig-iron piton from the edge of the hole, and replaced it with a modern glue anchor. Then he whipped a smart-rope through and carefully tightened his harness.

Katrinko began shaking with eagerness. "Pete, I am way hot for this. Lemme lead point."

Pete clipped a crab into Katrinko's harness, and linked their spex through the fiber-optic embedded in the rope. Then he slapped the neuter's shoulder. "Get bold, kid."

Katrinko flared out the webbing on her gripgloves, and dropped in feet-first.

The would-be escapees had made a lot of use of cabling already present in the tunnel. There were ceramic staples embedded periodically, to hold the cabling snug against the stone. The climbers had scrabbled their way up from staple to staple, using ladder-runged bamboo poles and iron hooks.

Katrinko stopped her descent and tied off. Pete sent their haulbags down. Then he dropped and slithered after her. He stopped at the lead chock, tied off, and let Katrinko take lead again, following her progress with the spex.

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An eerie glow shone at the bottom of the tunnel. Pay day. Pete felt a familiar transcendental tension overcome him. It surged through him with mad intensity. Fear, curiosity, and desire: the raw, hot, thieving thrill of a major-league intrusion. A feeling like being insane, but so much better than craziness, because now he felt so *awake.* Pete was awash in primal spiderness, cravings too deep and slippery to speak about.

The light grew hotter in Pete's infrareds. Below them was a slotted expanse of metal, gleaming like a kitchen sink, louvers with hot slots of light. Katrinko planted a foamchock in the tunnel wall, tied off, leaned back, and dropped a spy eye through the slot.

Pete's hands were too busy to reach his spex. "What do you see?" he hissed over cable.

Katrinko craned her head back, gloved palms pressing the goggles against her face. "I can see *everything,* man! Gardens of Eden, and cities of gold!"

The cave had been ancient solid rock once, a continental bulk. The rock had been pierced by a Russian-made drilling rig. A dry well, in a very dry country. And then some very weary, and very sunburned, and very determined Chinese Communist weapons engineers had installed a one-hundred megaton hydrogen bomb at the bottom of their dry hole. When their beast in its nest of layered casings achieved fusion, seismographs jumped like startled fawns in distant California.

The thermonuclear explosion had left a giant gasbubble at the heart of a crazy webwork of faults and cracks. The deep and empty bubble had lurked beneath the desert in utter and terrible silence, for ninety years.

Then Asia's new masters had sent in new and more sophisticated agencies.

Pete saw that the distant sloping walls of the cavern were daubed with starlight. White constellations, whole and entire. And amid the space—that giant and sweetly damp airspace—were three great glowing lozenges, three vertical cylinders the size of urban high rises. They seemed to be suspended in midair.

"Starships," Pete muttered.

"Starships," Katrinko agreed. Menus appeared in the shared visual space of their linked spex. Katrinko's fingertip sketched out a set of tiny moving sparks against the walls. "But check *that* out."

"What are those?"

"Heat signatures. Little engines." The envisioned world wheeled silently. "And check out over here too—and crawlin' around deep in there, dozens of the things. And Pete, see these? Those big ones? Kinda on patrol?"

"Robots."

"Yep."

"What the hell are they up to, down here?"

"Well, I figure it this way, man. If you're inside one of those fake starships, and you look out through those windows—those *portholes,* I guess we call 'em—you can't see anything but shiny stars. Deep space. But with spex, we can see right through all that business. And Pete, that whole stone sky down there is crawling with machinery."

"Man oh man."

"And nobody inside those starships can see *down,* man. There is a whole lot of very major weirdness going on down at the bottom of that cave. There's a lot of hot steamy water down there, deep in those rocks and those cracks."

"Water, or a big smelly soup maybe," Pete said. "A chemical soup."

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"Biochemical soup."

"Autonomous self-assembly proteinaceous biotech. Strictly forbidden by the Nonproliferation Protocols of the Manila Accords of 2037," said Pete. Pete rattled off this phrase with practiced ease, having rehearsed it any number of times during various background briefings.

"A whole big lake of way-hot, way-illegal, self-assembling goo down there."

"Yep. The very stuff that *our* covert-tech boys have been messing with under the Rockies for the past ten years."

"Aw, Pete, everybody cheats a little bit on the accords. The way we do it in NAFTA, it's no worse than bathtub gin. But this is *huge!* And Lord only knows what's inside those starships."

"Gotta be people, kid."

"Yep."

Pete drew a slow moist breath. "This is a big one, Trink. This is truly major-league. You and me, we got ourselves an intelligence coup here of historic proportions."

"If you're trying to say that we should go back to the glider now," Katrinko said, "don't even start with me."

"We need to go back to the glider," Pete insisted, "with the photographic proof that we got right now. That was our mission objective. It's what they pay us for."

"Whoop-tee-do."

"Besides, it's the patriotic thing. Right?"

"Maybe I'd play the patriot game, if I was in uniform," said Katrinko. "But the Army don't allow neuters. I'm a total freak and I'm a free agent, and I didn't come here to see Shangri-La and then turn around first thing."

"Yeah," Pete admitted. "I really know that feeling."

"I'm going down in there right now," Katrinko said. "You belay for me?"

"No way, kid. This time, I'm leading point."

Pete eased himself through a crudely broken louver and out onto the vast rocky ceiling. Pete had never much liked climbing rock. Nasty stuff, rock—all natural, no guaranteed engineering specifications. Still, Pete had spent a great deal of his life on ceilings. Ceilings he understood.

He worked his way out on a series of congealed lava knobs, till he hit a nice solid crack. He did a rapid set of fist-jams, then set a pair of foam-clamps, and tied himself off on anchor.

Pete panned slowly in place, upside down on the ceiling, muffled in his camou gear, scanning methodically for the sake of Katrinko back on the fiber-optic spex link. Large sections of the ceiling looked weirdly worm-eaten, as if drills or acids had etched the rock away. Pete could discern in the eerie glow of infrared that the three fake starships were actually supported on columns. Huge hollow tubes, lacelike and almost entirely invisible, made of something black and impossibly strong, maybe carbon-fiber. There were water pipes inside the columns, and electrical power.

Those columns were the quickest and easiest ways to climb down or up to the starships. Those columns were also very exposed. They looked like excellent places to get killed.

Pete knew that he was safely invisible to any naked human eye, but there wasn't much he could do about his heat signature. For all he knew, at this moment he was glowing like a Christmas tree on the sensors of a thousand heavily armed robots. But you couldn't leave a thousand machines armed to

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a hair-trigger for years on end. And who would program them to spend their time watching ceilings?

The muscular burn had faded from his back and shoulders. Pete shook a little extra blood through his wrists, unhooked, and took off on cleats and gripwebs. He veered around one of the fake stars, a great glowing glassine bulb the size of a laundry basket. The fake star was cemented into a big rocky wart, and it radiated a cold, enchanting, and gooey firefly light. Pete was so intrigued by this bold deception that his cleat missed a smear. His left foot swung loose. His left shoulder emitted a nasty-feeling, expensive-sounding pop. Pete grunted, planted both cleats, and slapped up a glue patch, with tendons smarting and the old forearm clock ticking fast. He whipped a crab through the patchloop and sagged within his harness, breathing hard.

On the surface of his spex, Katrinko's glowing fingertip whipped across the field of Pete's vision, and pointed. Something moving out there. Pete had company.

Pete eased a string of flashbangs from his sleeve. Then he hunkered down in place, trusting to his camouflage, and watching.

A robot was moving toward him among the dark pits of the fake stars. Wobbling and jittering.

Pete had never seen any device remotely akin to this robot. It had a porous, foamy hide, like cork and plastic. It had a blind compartmented knob for a head, and fourteen long fibrous legs like a frayed mess of used rope, terminating in absurdly complicated feet, like a boxful of grip pliers. Hanging upside down from bits of rocky irregularity too small to see, it would open its big warty head and flick out a forked sensor like a snake's tongue. Sometimes it would dip itself close to the ceiling, for a lingering chemical smooch on the surface of the rock.

Pete watched with murderous patience as the device backed away, drew nearer, spun around a bit, meandered a little closer, sucked some more ceiling rock, made up its mind about something, replanted its big grippy feet, hoofed along closer yet, lost its train of thought, retreated a bit, sniffed the air at length, sucked meditatively on the end of one of its ropy tentacles.

It finally reached him, walked deftly over his legs, and dipped up to lick enthusiastically at the chemical traces left by his gripweb. The robot seemed enchanted by the taste of the glove's elastomer against the rock. It hung there on its fourteen plier feet, loudly licking and rasping.

Pete lashed out with his pick. The razored point slid with a sullen crunch right through the thing's corky head.

It went limp instantly, pinned there against the ceiling. Then with a nasty rustling it deployed a whole unsuspected set of waxy and filmy appurtenances. Complex bug-tongue things, mandible scrapers, delicate little spatulas, all reeling and trembling out of its slotted underside.

It was not going to die. It couldn't die, because it had never been alive. It was a piece of biotechnical machinery. Dying was simply not on its agenda anywhere. Pete photographed the device carefully as it struggled with obscene mechanical stupidity to come to workable terms with its new environmental parameters. Then Pete levered the pick loose from the ceiling, shook it loose, and dropped the pierced robot straight down to hell.

Pete climbed more quickly now, favoring the strained shoulder. He worked his way methodically out to the relative ease of the vertical wall, where he discovered a large mined-out vein in the constellation Sagittarius. The vein was a big snaky recess where some kind of ore had been nibbled and strained

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from the rock. By the look of it, the rock had been chewed away by a termite host of tiny robots with mouths like toenail clippers.

He signaled on the spex for Katrinko. The neuter followed along the clipped and anchored line, climbing like a fiend while lugging one of the haulbags. As Katrinko settled in to their new base camp, Pete returned to the louvers to fetch the second bag. When he'd finally heaved and grappled his way back, his shoulder was aching bitterly and his nerves were shot. They were done for the day.

Katrinko had put up the emission-free encystment web at the mouth of their crevice. With Pete returned to relative safety, she reeled in their smart-ropes and fed them a handful of sugar.

Pete cracked open two capsules of instant fluff, then sank back gratefully into the wool.

Katrinko took off her mask. She was vibrating with alert enthusiasm. Youth, thought Pete—youth, and the 8 percent metabolic advantage that came from lacking sex organs. "We're in so much trouble now," Katrinko whispered, with a feverish grin in the faint red glow of a single indicator light. She no longer resembled a boy or a young woman. Katrinko looked completely diabolical. This was a nonsexed creature. Pete liked to think of her as a "she," because this was somehow easier on his mind, but Katrinko was an "it." Now it was filled with glee, because finally it had placed itself in a proper and pleasing situation. Stark and feral confrontation with its own stark and feral little being.

"Yeah, this is trouble," Pete said. He placed a fat medicated tick onto the vein inside of his elbow. "And you're taking first watch."

Pete woke four hours later, with a heart-fluttering rise from the stunned depths of chemically assisted delta-sleep. He felt numb, and lightly dusted with a brain-clouding amnesia, as if he'd slept for four straight days. He had been profoundly helpless in the grip of the drug, but the risk had been worth it, because now he was thoroughly rested. Pete sat up, and tried the left shoulder experimentally. It was much improved.

Pete rubbed feeling back into his stubbled face and scalp, then strapped his spex on. He discovered Katrinko squatting on her haunches, in the radiant glow of her own body heat, pondering over an ugly mess of spines, flakes, and goo.

Pete touched spex knobs and leaned forward. "What you got there?"

"Dead robots. They ate our foamchocks, right out of the ceiling. They eat anything. I killed the ones that tried to break into camp." Katrinko stroked at a midair menu, then handed Pete a fiber lead for his spex. "Check this footage I took."

Katrinko had been keeping watch with the gelcams, picking out passing robots in the glow of their engine heat. She'd documented them on infrared, saving and editing the clearest live-action footage. "These little ones with the ball-shaped feet, I call them keets," she narrated, as the captured frames cascaded across Pete's spex-clad gaze. "They're small, but they're really fast, and all over the place—I had to kill three of them. This one with the sharp spiral nose is a drillet. Those are a pair of dubits. The dubits always travel in pairs. This big thing here, that looks like a spilled dessert with big eyes and a ball on a chain, I call that one a lurchen. Because of the way it moves, see? It's sure a lot faster than it looks."

Katrinko stopped the spex replay, switched back to live perception, and

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poked carefully at the broken litter before her booted feet. The biggest device in the heap resembled a dissected cat's head stuffed with cables and bristles. "I also killed this piteen. Piteens don't die easy, man."

"There's lots of these things?"

"I figure hundreds, maybe thousands. All different kinds. And every one of 'em as stupid as dirt. Or else we'd be dead and disassembled a hundred times already."

Pete stared at the dissected robots, a cooling mass of nerve-netting, batteries, veiny armor plates, and gelatin. "Why do they look so crazy?"

"'Cause they grew all by themselves. Nobody ever designed them." Katrinko glanced up. "You remember those big virtual spaces for weapons design, that they run out in Alamagordo?"

"Yeah, sure, Alamagordo. Physics simulations on those super-size quantum gelbrains. Huge virtualities, with ultra-fast, ultra-fine detail. You bet I remember New Mexico! I love to raid a great computer lab. There's something so traditional about the hack."

"Yeah. See, for us NAFTA types, physics virtualities are a military app. We always give our tech to the military whenever it looks really dangerous. But let's say you don't share our NAFTA values. You don't wanna test new weapons systems inside giant virtualities. Let's say you want to make a can-opener, instead."

During her sleepless hours huddling on watch, Katrinko had clearly been giving this matter a lot of thought. "Well, you could study other people's can-openers and try to improve the design. Or else you could just set up a giant high-powered virtuality with a bunch of virtual cans inside it. Then you make some can-opener simulations, that are basically blobs of goo. They're simulated goo, but they're also programs, and those programs trade data and evolve. Whenever they pierce a can, you reward them by making more copies of them. You're running, like, a million generations of a million different possible can-openers, all day every day, in a simulated space."

The concept was not entirely alien to Spider Pete. "Yeah, I've heard the rumors. It was one of those stunts like Artificial Intelligence. It might look really good on paper, but you can't ever get it to work in real life."

"Yeah, and now it's illegal too. Kinda hard to police, though. But let's imagine you're into economic warfare and you figure out how to do this. Finally, you evolve this super weird, super can-opener that no human being could ever have invented. Something that no human being could even *imagine*. Because it grew like a mushroom in an entire alternate physics. But you have all the specs for its shape and proportions, right there in the supercomputer. So to make one inside the real world, you just print it out like a photograph. And it works! It runs! See? Instant cheap consumer goods."

Pete thought it over. "So you're saying the Sphere people got that idea to work, and these robots here were built that way?"

"Pete, I just can't figure any other way this could have happened. These machines are just too alien. They had to come from some totally nonhuman, autonomous process. Even the best Japanese engineers can't design a jelly robot made out of fuzz and rope that can move like a caterpillar. There's not enough money in the world to pay human brains to think that out."

Pete prodded at the gooey ruins with his pick. "Well, you got that right."

"Whoever built this place, they broke a lot of rules and treaties. But they did it all *really cheap*. They did it in a way that is so cheap that it is *beyond economics*." Katrinko thought this over. "It's *way* beyond economics, and

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that's exactly *why* it's against all those rules and the treaties in the first place."

"Fast, cheap, and out of control."

"Exactly, man. If this stuff ever got loose in the real world, it would mean the end of everything we know."

Pete liked this last statement not at all. He had always disliked apocalyptic hype. He liked it even less now because under these extreme circumstances it sounded very plausible. The Sphere had the youngest and the biggest population of the three major trading blocs, and the youngest and the biggest ideas. People in Asia knew how to get things done. "Y'know, Lyle Schweik once told me that the weirdest bicycles in the world come out of China these days."

"Well, he's right. They do. And what about those Chinese circuitry chips they've been dumping in the NAFTA markets lately? Those chips are dirt cheap and work fine, but they're full of all this crazy leftover wiring that doubles back and gets all snarled up. . . . I always thought that was just shoddy workmanship. Man, 'workmanship' had nothing to *do* with those chips."

Pete nodded soberly. "Okay. Chips and bicycles, that much I can understand. There's a lot of money in that. But who the heck would take the trouble to create a giant hole in the ground that's full of robots and fake stars? I mean, *why?*"

Katrinko shrugged. "I guess it's just the Sphere, man. They still do stuff just because it's wonderful."

The bottom of the world was boiling over. During the passing century, the nuclear test cavity had accumulated its own little desert aquifer, a pitch-black subterranean oasis. The bottom of the bubble was an unearthly drowned maze of shattered cracks and chemical deposition, all turned to simmering tidepools of mechanical self-assemblage. Oxygen-fizzing geysers of black fungus tea.

Steam rose steadily in the darkness amid the crags, rising to condense and run in chilly rivulets down the spherical star-spangled walls. Down at the bottom, all the water was eagerly collected by aberrant devices of animated sponge and string. Katrinko instantly tagged these as "smits" and "fuzzens."

The smits and fuzzens were nightmare dishrags and piston-powered spaghetti, leaping and slopping wetly from crag to crag. Katrinko took an unexpected ease and pleasure in naming and photographing the machines. Speculation boiled with sinister ease from the sexless youngster's vulpine head, a swift off-the-cuff adjustment to this alien toy world. It would seem that the kid lived rather closer to the future than Pete did.

They cranked their way from boulder to boulder, crack to liquid crack. They documented fresh robot larvae, chewing their way to the freedom of darkness through plugs of goo and muslin. It was a whole miniature creation, designed in the senseless gooey cores of a Chinese supercomputing gelbrain, and transmuted into reality in a hot broth of undead mechanized protein. This was by far the most amazing phenomenon that Pete had ever witnessed. Pete was accordingly plunged into gloom. Knowledge was power in his world. He knew with leaden certainty that he was taking on far too much voltage for his own good.

Pete was a professional. He could imagine stealing classified military secrets from a superpower, and surviving that experience. It would be very risky, but in the final analysis it was just the military. A rocket base, for instance—a secret Asian rocket base might have been a lot of fun.

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But this was not military. This was an entire new means of industrial production. Pete knew with instinctive street-level certainty that tech of this level of revolutionary weirdness was not a spy thing, a sports thing, or a soldier thing. This was a big, big *money* thing. He might survive discovering it. He'd never get away with revealing it.

The thrilling wonder of it all really bugged him. Thrilling wonder was at best a passing thing. The sober implications for the longer term weighed on Pete's soul like a damp towel. He could imagine escaping this place in one piece, but he couldn't imagine any plausible aftermath for handing over nifty photographs of thrilling wonder to military spooks on the Potomac. He couldn't imagine what the powers-that-were would do with that knowledge. He rather dreaded what they would do to him for giving it to them.

Pete wiped a sauna cascade of sweat from his neck.

"So I figure it's either geothermal power, or a fusion generator down there," said Katrinko.

"I'd be betting thermonuclear, given the circumstances." The rocks below their busy cleats were a-skitter with bugs: gippers and ghents and kebbits, dismantlers and glue-spreaders and brain-eating carrion disassemblers. They were profoundly dumb little devices, specialized as centipedes. They didn't seem very aggressive, but it surely would be a lethal mistake to sit down among them.

A barnacle thing with an iris mouth and long whipping eyes took a careful taste of Katrinko's boot. She retreated to a crag with a yelp.

"Wear your mask," Pete chided. The damp heat was bliss after the skin-eating chill of the Taklamakan, but most of the vents and cracks were spewing thick smells of hot beef stew and burnt rubber, all varieties of eldritch mechano-metabolic byproduct. His lungs felt sore at the very thought of it.

Pete cast his foggy spex up the nearest of the carbon-fiber columns, and the golden, glowing, impossibly tempting lights of those starship portholes up above.

Katrinko led point. She was pitilessly exposed against the lacelike girders. They didn't want to risk exposure during two trips, so they each carried a haul bag.

The climb went well at first. Then a machine rose up from wet darkness like a six-winged dragonfly. Its stinging tail lashed through the thready column like the kick of a mule. It connected brutally. Katrinko shot backwards from the impact, tumbled ten meters, and dangled like a ragdoll from her last backup chock.

The flying creature circled in a figure eight, attempting to make up its nonexistent mind. Then a slower but much larger creature writhed and fluttered out of the starry sky, and attacked Katrinko's dangling haulbag. The bag burst like a Christmas piñata in a churning array of taloned wings. A fabulous cascade of expensive spy gear splashed down to the hot pools below.

Katrinko twitched feebly at the end of her rope. The dragonfly, cruelly alerted, went for her movement. Pete launched a string of flashbangs.

The world erupted in flash, heat, concussion, and flying chaff. Impossibly hot and loud, a thunderstorm in a closet. The best kind of disappearance magic: total overwhelming distraction, the only real magic in the world.

Pete soared up to Katrinko like a balloon on a bungee-cord. When he reached the bottom of the starship, twenty-seven heart-pounding seconds later, he had burned out both the smart-ropes.

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The silvery rain of chaff was driving the bugs to mania. The bottom of the cavern was suddenly a-crawl with leaping mechanical heat-ghosts, an instant menagerie of skippers and humpers and floppers. At the rim of perception, there were new things rising from the depths of the pools, vast and scaly, like golden carp to a rain of fish chow.

Pete's own haulbag had been abandoned at the base of the column. That bag was clearly not long for this world.

Katrinko came to with a sudden winded gasp. They began free-climbing the outside of the starship. It surface was stony, rough and uneven, something like pumice, or wasp spit.

They found the underside of a monster porthole and pressed themselves flat against the surface.

There they waited, inert and unmoving, for an hour. Katrinko caught her breath. Her ribs stopped bleeding. The two of them waited for another hour, while crawling and flying heat-ghosts nosed furiously around their little world, following the tatters of their programming. They waited a third hour.

Finally they were joined in their haven by an oblivious gang of machines with suckery skirts and wheelbarrows for heads. The robots chose a declivity and began filling it with big mandible trowels of stony mortar, slopping it on and jaw-chiseling it into place, smoothing everything over, tireless and pitiless.

Pete seized this opportunity to attempt to salvage their lost equipment. There had been such fabulous federal bounty in there: smart audio bugs, heavy-duty gelcams, sensors and detectors, pulleys, crampons and latches, priceless vials of programmed neural goo. . . . Pete crept back to the bottom of the spacecraft.

Everything was long gone. Even the depleted smartropes had been eaten, by a long trail of foraging keets. The little machines were still squirreling about in the black lace of the column, sniffing and scraping at the last molecular traces, with every appearance of satisfaction.

Pete rejoined Katrinko, and woke her where she clung rigid and stupefied to her hiding spot. They inched their way around the curved rim of the starship hull, hunting for a possible weakness. They were in very deep trouble now, for their best equipment was gone. It didn't matter. Their course was very obvious now, and the loss of alternatives had clarified Pete's mind. He was consumed with a burning desire to break in.

Pete slithered into the faint shelter of a large, deeply pitted hump. There he discovered a mess of braided rope. The rope was woven of dead and mashed organic fibers, something like the hair at the bottom of a sink. The rope had gone all petrified under a stony lacquer of robot spit.

These were climber's ropes. Someone had broken out here—smashed through the hull of the ship, from the inside. The robots had come to repair the damage, carefully re-sealing the exit hole, and leaving this ugly hump of stony scar tissue.

Pete pulled his gelcam drill. He had lost the sugar reserves along with the haulbags. Without sugar to metabolize, the little enzyme-driven rotor would starve and be useless soon. That fact could not be helped. Pete pressed the device against the hull, waited as it punched its way through, and squirted in a gelcam to follow.

He saw a farm. Pete could scarcely have been more astonished. It was certainly farmland, though. Cute, toy farmland, all under a stony blue ceiling, crisscrossed with hot grids of radiant light, embraced in the stony arch of the

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enclosing hull. There were fishponds with reeds. Ditches, and a wooden irrigation wheel. A little bridge of bamboo. There were hairy melon vines in rich black soil and neat, entirely weedless fields of dwarfed red grain. Not a soul in sight.

Katrinko crept up and linked in on cable. "So where is everybody?" Pete said.

"They're all at the portholes," said Katrinko, coughing.

"What?" said Pete, surprised. "Why?"

"Because of those flashbangs," Katrinko wheezed. Her battered ribs were still paining her. "They're all at the portholes, looking out into the darkness. Waiting for something else to happen."

"But we did that stuff hours ago."

"It was very big news, man. Nothing ever happens in there."

Pete nodded, fired with resolve. "Well then. We're breakin' in."

Katrinko was way game. "Gonna use caps?"

"Too obvious."

"Acids and fibrillators?"

"Lost 'em in the haulbags."

"Well, that leaves cheesewires," Katrinko concluded. "I got two."

"I got six."

Katrinko nodded in delight. "Six cheesewires! You're loaded for bear, man!"

"I love cheesewires," Pete grunted. He had helped to invent them.

Eight minutes and twelve seconds later they were inside the starship. They re-set the cored-out plug behind them, delicately gluing it in place and carefully obscuring the hair-thin cuts.

Katrinko sidestepped into a grove of bamboo. Her camou bloomed in green and tan and yellow, with such instant and treacherous ease that Pete lost her entirely. Then she waved, and the spex edge-detectors kicked in on her silhouette.

Pete lifted his spex for a human naked-eye take on the situation. There was simply nothing there at all. Katrinko was gone, less than a ghost, like pitchforking mercury with your eyelashes.

So they were safe now. They could glide through this bottled farm like a pair of bad dreams.

They scanned the spacecraft from top to bottom, looking for dangerous and interesting phenomena. Control rooms manned by Asian space technicians maybe, or big lethal robots, or video monitors—something that might cramp their style or kill them. In the thirty-seven floors of the spacecraft, they found no such thing.

The five thousand inhabitants spent their waking hours farming. The crew of the starship were preindustrial, tribal, Asian peasants. Men, women, old folks, little kids.

The local peasants rose every single morning, as their hot networks of wiring came alive in the ceiling. They would milk their goats. They would feed their sheep, and some very odd, knee-high, dwarf Bactrian camels. They cut bamboo and netted their fishponds. They cut down tamarisks and poplar trees for firewood. They tended melon vines and grew plums and hemp. They brewed alcohol, and ground grain, and boiled millet, and squeezed cooking oil out of rapeseed. They made clothes out of hemp and raw wool and leather, and baskets out of reeds and straw. They ate a lot of carp.

And they raised a whole mess of chickens. Somebody not from around here

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had been fooling with the chickens. Apparently these were super space-chickens of some kind, leftover lab products from some serious long-term attempt to screw around with chicken DNA. The hens produced five or six lumpy eggs every day. The roosters were enormous, and all different colors, and very smelly, and distinctly reptilian.

It was very quiet and peaceful inside the starship. The animals made their lowing and clucking noises, and the farm workers sang to themselves in the tiny round-edged fields, and the incessant foot-driven water pumps would clack rhythmically, but there were no city noises. No engines anywhere. No screens. No media.

There was no money. There were a bunch of tribal elders who sat under the blossoming plum trees outside the big stone granaries. They messed with beads on wires, and wrote notes on slips of wood. Then the soldiers, or the cops—they were a bunch of kids in crude leather armor, with spears—would tramp in groups, up and down the dozens of stairs, on the dozens of floors. Marching like crazy, and requisitioning stuff, and carrying stuff on their backs, and handing things out to people. Basically spreading the wealth around.

Most of the weird bearded old guys were palace accountants, but there were some others, too. They sat cross-legged on mats in their homemade robes, and straw sandals, and their little spangly hats, discussing important matters at slow and extreme length. Sometimes they wrote stuff down on palm-leaves.

Pete and Katrinko spent a special effort to spy on these old men in the spangled hats, because, after close study, they had concluded that this was the local government. They pretty much had to be the government. These old men with the starry hats were the only part of the population who weren't being worked to a frazzle.

Pete and Katrinko found themselves a cozy spot on the roof of the granary, one of the few permanent structures inside the spacecraft. It never rained inside the starship, so there wasn't much call for roofs. Nobody ever trespassed up on the roof of the granary. It was clear that the very idea of doing this was beyond local imagination. So Pete and Katrinko stole some bamboo water jugs, and some lovely handmade carpets, and a lean-to tent, and set up camp there.

Katrinko studied an especially elaborate palm-leaf book that she had filched from the local temple. There were pages and pages of dense alien script. "Man, what do you suppose these yokels have to write about?"

"The way I figure it," said Pete, "they're writing down everything they can remember from the world outside."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Kinda building up an intelligence dossier for their little starship regime, see? Because that's all they'll ever know, because the people who put them inside here aren't giving 'em any news. And they're sure as hell never gonna let 'em out."

Katrinko leafed carefully through the stiff and brittle pages of the handmade book. The people here spoke only one language. It was no language Pete or Katrinko could even begin to recognize. "Then this is their history. Right?"

"It's their lives, kid. Their past lives, back when they were still real people, in the big real world outside. Transistor radios, and shoulder-launched rockets. Barbed-wire, pacification campaigns, ID cards. Camel caravans coming

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in over the border, with mortars and explosives. And very advanced Sphere mandarin bosses, who just don't have the time to put up with armed, Asian, tribal fanatics."

Katrinko looked up. "That kinda sounds like *your* version of the outside world, Pete."

Pete shrugged. "Hey, it's what happens."

"You suppose these guys really believe they're inside a real starship?"

"I guess that depends on how much they learned from the guys who broke out of here with the picks and the ropes."

Katrinko thought about it. "You know what's truly pathetic? The shabby illusion of all this. Some spook mandarin's crazy notion that ethnic separatists could be squeezed down tight, and spat out like watermelon seeds into interstellar space. . . . Man, what a *come-on,* what an enticement, what an empty promise!"

"I could sell that idea," Pete said thoughtfully. "You know how *far away* the stars really are, kid? About *four hundred years* away, that's how far. You seriously want to get human beings to travel to another star, you gotta put human beings inside of a sealed can for four hundred solid years. But what are people supposed to *do* in there, all that time? The only thing they *can* do is quietly run a farm. Because that's what a starship is. It's a desert oasis."

"So you want to try a dry-run starship experiment," said Katrinko. "And in the meantime, you happen to have some handy religious fanatics in the backwoods of Asia, who are shooting your ass off. Guys who refuse to change their age-old lives, even though you are very, very high-tech."

"Yep. That's about the size of it. Means, motive, and opportunity."

"I get it. But I can't believe that somebody went through with that scheme in real life. I mean, rounding up an ethnic minority, and sticking them down in some godforsaken hole, just so you'll never have to think about them again. That's just impossible!"

"Did I ever tell you that my grandfather was a Seminole?" Pete said.

Katrinko shook her head. "What's that mean?"

"They were American tribal guys who ended up stuck in a swamp. The Florida Seminoles, they called 'em. Y'know, maybe they just *called* my grandfather a Seminole. He dressed really funny. . . . Maybe it just *sounded good* to call him a Seminole. Otherwise, he just would have been some strange, illiterate geezer."

Katrinko's brow wrinkled. "Does it *matter* that your grandfather was a Seminole?"

"I used to think it did. That's where I got my skin color—as if that matters, nowadays. I reckon it mattered plenty to my grandfather, though. . . . He was always stompin' and carryin' on about a lot of weird stuff we couldn't understand. His English was pretty bad. He was never around much when we needed him."

"Pete. . . ." Katrinko sighed. "I think it's time we got out of this place."

"How come?" Pete said, surprised. "We're safe up here. The locals are not gonna hurt us. They can't even *see* us. They can't touch us. Hell, they can't even *imagine* us. With our fantastic tactical advantages, we're just like gods to these people."

"I know all that, man. They're like the ultimate dumb straight people. I don't like them very much. They're not much of a challenge to us. In fact, they kind of creep me out."

"No way! They're fascinating. Those baggy clothes, the acoustic songs, all

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that menial labor. . . . These people got something that we modern people just don't have any more."

"Huh?" Katrinko said. "Like *what,* exactly?"

"I dunno," Pete admitted.

"Well, whatever it is, it can't be very important." Katrinko sighed. "We got some serious challenges on the agenda, man. We gotta sidestep our way past all those angry robots outside, then head up that shaft, then hoof it back, four days through a freezing desert, with no haulbags. All the way back to the glider."

"But Trink, there are two other starships in here that we didn't break into yet. Don't you want to see those guys?"

"What I'd like to see right now is a hot bath in a four-star hotel," said Katrinko. "And some very big international headlines, maybe. All about *me.* That would be lovely." She grinned.

"But what about the *people?*"

"Look, I'm not 'people,'" Katrinko said calmly. "Maybe it's because I'm a neuter, Pete, but I can tell you're way off the subject. These people are none of our business. Our business now is to return to our glider in an operational condition, so that we can complete our assigned mission, and return to base with our data. Okay?"

"Well, let's break into just one more starship first."

"We gotta move, Pete. We've lost our best equipment, and we're running low on body fat. This isn't something that we can kid about and live."

"But we'll never come back here again. Somebody will, but it sure as heck won't be *us.* See, it's a Spider thing."

Katrinko was weakening. "One more starship? Not both of 'em?"

"Just one more."

"Okay, good deal."

The hole they had cut through the starship's hull had been rapidly cemented by robots. It cost them two more cheesewires to cut themselves a new exit. Then Katrinko led point, up across the stony ceiling, and down the carbon column to the second ship. To avoid annoying the lurking robot guards, they moved with hypnotic slowness and excessive stealth. This made it a grueling trip.

This second ship had seen hard use. The hull was extensively scarred with great wads of cement, entombing many lengths of dried and knotted rope. Pete and Katrinko found a weak spot and cut their way in.

This starship was crowded. It was loud inside, and it smelled. The floors were crammed with hot and sticky little bazaars, where people sold handicrafts and liquor and food. Criminals were being punished by being publicly chained to posts and pelted with offal by passers-by. Big crowds of ragged men and tattooed women gathered around brutal cockfights, featuring spurred mutant chickens half the size of dogs. All the men carried knives.

The architecture here was more elaborate, all kinds of warrens, and courtyards, and damp, sticky alleys. After exploring four floors, Katrinko suddenly declared that she recognized their surroundings. According to Katrinko, they were a physical replica of sets from a popular Japanese interactive samurai epic. Apparently the starship's designers had needed some pre-industrial Asian village settings, and they hadn't wanted to take the expense and trouble to design them from scratch. So they had programmed their construction robots with pirated game designs.

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This starship had once been lavishly equipped with at least three hundred armed video camera installations. Apparently, the mandarins had come to the stunning realization that the mere fact that they were recording crime didn't mean that they could control it. Their spy cameras were all dead now. Most had been vandalized. Some had gone down fighting. They were all inert and abandoned.

The rebellious locals had been very busy. After defeating the spy cameras, they had created a set of giant hullbreakers. These were siege engines, big crossbow torsion machines, made of hemp and wood and bamboo. The hullbreakers were starship community efforts, elaborately painted and ribboned, and presided over by tough, aggressive gang bosses with batons and big leather belts.

Pete and Katrinko watched a labor gang, hard at work on one of the hullbreakers. Women braided rope ladders from hair and vegetable fiber, while smiths forged pitons over choking, hazy charcoal fires. It was clear from the evidence that these restive locals had broken out of their starship jail at least twenty times. Every time they had been corralled back in by the relentless efforts of mindless machines. Now they were busily preparing yet another breakout.

"These guys sure have got initiative," said Pete admiringly. "Let's do 'em a little favor, okay?"

"Yeah?"

"Here they are, taking all this trouble to hammer their way out. But we still have a bunch of caps. We got no more use for 'em, after we leave this place. So the way I figure it, we blow their wall out big-time, and let a whole bunch of 'em loose at once. Then you and I can escape real easy in the confusion."

Katrinko loved this idea, but had to play devil's advocate. "You really think we ought to interfere like that? That kind of shows our hand, doesn't it?"

"Nobody's watching any more," said Pete. "Some technocrat figured this for a big lab experiment. But they wrote these people off, or maybe they lost their anthropology grant. These people are totally forgotten. Let's give the poor bastards a show."

Pete and Katrinko planted their explosives, took cover on the ceiling, and cheerfully watched the wall blow out.

A violent gust of air came through as pressures equalized, carrying a hemorrhage of dust and leaves into interstellar space. The locals were totally astounded by the explosion, but when the repair robots showed up, they soon recovered their morale. A terrific battle broke out, a general vengeful frenzy of crab-bashing and sponge-skewering. Women and children tussled with the keets and bibbets. Soldiers in leather cuirasses fought with the bigger machines, deploying pikes, crossbow quarrels, and big robot-mashing mauls.

The robots were profoundly stupid, but they were indifferent to their casualties, and entirely relentless.

The locals made the most of their window of opportunity. They loaded a massive harpoon into a torsion catapult, and fired it into space. Their target was the neighboring starship, the third and last of them.

The barbed spear bounded off the hull. So they reeled it back in on a monster bamboo hand-reel, cursing and shouting like maniacs.

The starship's entire population poured into the fight. The walls and bulkheads shook with the tramp of their angry feet. The outnumbered robots fell back. Pete and Katrinko seized this golden opportunity to slip out the hole. They climbed swiftly up the hull, and out of reach of the combat.

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The locals fired their big harpoon again. This time the barbed tip struck true, and it stuck there quivering.

Then a little kid was heaved into place, half-naked, with a hammer and screws, and a rope threaded through his belt. He had a crown of dripping candles set upon his head.

Katrinko glanced back, and stopped dead.

Pete urged her on, then stopped as well.

The child began reeling himself industriously along the trembling harpoon line, trailing a bigger rope. An airborne machine came to menace him. It fell back twitching, pestered by a nasty scattering of crossbow bolts.

Pete found himself mesmerized. He hadn't felt the desperation of the circumstances, until he saw this brave little boy ready to fall to his death. Pete had seen many climbers who took risks because they were crazy. He'd seen professional climbers, such as himself, who played games with risk as masters of applied technique. He'd never witnessed climbing as an act of raw, desperate sacrifice.

The heroic child arrived on the grainy hull of the alien ship, and began banging his pitons in a hammer-swinging frenzy. His crown of candles shook and flickered with his efforts. The boy could barely see. He had slung himself out into stygian darkness to fall to his doom.

Pete climbed up to Katrinko and quickly linked in on cable. "We gotta leave now, kid. It's now or never."

"Not yet," Katrinko said. "I'm taping all this."

"It's our big chance."

"We'll go later." Katrinko watched a flying vacuum cleaner batting by, to swat cruelly at the kid's legs. She turned her masked head to Pete and her whole body stiffened with rage. "You got a cheesewire left?"

"I got three."

"Gimme. I gotta go help him."

Katrinko unplugged, slicked down the starship's wall in a daring controlled slide, and hit the stretched rope. To Pete's complete astonishment, Katrinko lit there in a crouch, caught herself atop the vibrating line, and simply ran for it. She ran along the humming tightrope in a thrumming blur, stunning the locals so thoroughly that they were barely able to fire their crossbows.

Flying quarrels whizzed past and around her, nearly skewering the terrified child at the far end of the rope. Then Katrinko leapt and bounded into space, her gloves and cleats outspread. She simply vanished.

It was a champion's gambit if Pete had ever seen one. It was a legendary move.

Pete could manage well enough on a tightrope. He had experience, excellent balance, and physical acumen. He was, after all, a professional. He could walk a rope if he was put to the job.

But not in full climbing gear, with cleats. And not on a slack, handbraided, homemade rope. Not when the rope was very poorly anchored by a homemade pig-iron harpoon. Not when he outweighed Katrinko by twenty kilos. Not in the middle of a flying circus of airborne robots. And not in a cloud of arrows.

Pete was simply not that crazy any more. Instead, he would have to follow Katrinko the sensible way. He would have to climb the starship, traverse the ceiling, and climb down to the third starship onto the far side. A hard three hours' work at the very best—four hours, with any modicum of safety.

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Pete weighed the odds, made up his mind, and went after the job.

Pete turned in time to see Katrinko busily cheesewiring her way through the hull of Starship Three. A gout of white light poured out as the cored plug slid aside. For a deadly moment, Katrinko was a silhouetted goblin, her camou useless as the starship's radiance framed her. Her clothing fluttered in a violent gust of escaping air.

Below her, the climbing child had anchored himself to the wall and tied off his second rope. He looked up at the sudden gout of light, and he screamed so loudly that the whole universe rang.

The child's many relatives reacted by instinct, with a ragged volley of crossbow shots. The arrows veered and scattered in the gusting wind, but there were a lot of them. Katrinko ducked, and flinched, and rolled headlong into the starship. She vanished again.

Had she been hit? Pete set an anchor, tied off, and tried the radio. But without the relays in the haulbag, the weak signal could not get through.

Pete climbed on doggedly. It was the only option left.

After half an hour, Pete began coughing. The starry cosmic cavity had filled with a terrible smell. The stench was coming from the invaded starship, pouring slowly from the cored-out hole. A long-bottled, deadly stink of burning rot.

Climbing solo, Pete gave it his best. His shoulder was bad and, worse yet, his spex began to misbehave. He finally reached the cored-out entrance that Katrinko had cut. The locals were already there in force, stringing themselves a sturdy rope bridge, and attaching it to massive screws. The locals brandished torches, spears, and crossbows. They were fighting off the incessant attacks of the robots. It was clear from their wild expressions of savage glee that they had been longing for this moment for years.

Pete slipped past them unnoticed, into Starship Three. He breathed the soured air for a moment, and quickly retreated again. He inserted a new set of mask filters, and returned.

He found Katrinko's cooling body, wedged against the ceiling. An unlucky crossbow shot had slashed through her suit and punctured Katrinko's left arm. So, with her usual presence of mind, she had deftly leapt up a nearby wall, tied off on a chock, and hidden herself well out of harm's way. She'd quickly stopped the bleeding. Despite its awkward location, she'd even managed to get her wound bandaged.

Then the foul air had silently and stealthily overcome her.

With her battered ribs and a major wound, Katrinko hadn't been able to tell her dizziness from shock. Feeling sick, she had relaxed, and tried to catch her breath. A fatal gambit. She was still hanging there, unseen and invisible, dead.

Pete discovered that Katrinko was far from alone. The crew here had all died. Died months ago, maybe years ago. Some kind of huge fire inside the spacecraft. The electric lights were still on, the internal machinery worked, but there was no one left here but mummies.

These dead tribal people had the nicest clothes Pete had yet seen. Clearly they'd spent a lot of time knitting and embroidering, during the many weary years of their imprisonment. The corpses had all kinds of layered sleeves, and tatted aprons, and braided belt-ties, and lacquered hairclips, and excessively nifty little sandals. They'd all smothered horribly during the sullen inferno, along with their cats and dogs and enormous chickens, in a sudden wave of smoke and combustion that had filled their spacecraft in minutes.

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This was far too complicated to be anything as simple as mere genocide. Pete figured the mandarins for gentlemen technocrats, experts with the best of intentions. The lively possibility remained that it was mass suicide. But on mature consideration, Pete had to figure this for a very bad, and very embarrassing, social-engineering accident.

Though that certainly wasn't what they would say about this mess, in Washington. There was no political mess nastier than a nasty ethnic mess. Pete couldn't help but notice that these well-behaved locals hadn't bothered to do any harm to their spacecraft's lavish surveillance equipment. But their cameras were off and their starship was stone dead anyway.

The air began to clear inside the spacecraft. A pair of soldiers from Starship Number Two came stamping down the hall, industriously looting the local corpses. They couldn't have been happier about their opportunity. They were grinning with awestruck delight.

Pete returned to his comrade's stricken body. He stripped the camou suit—he needed the batteries. The neuter's lean and sexless corpse was puffy with subcutaneous storage pockets, big encystments of skin where Katrinko stored her last-ditch escape tools. The battered ribs were puffy and blue. Pete could not go on.

Pete returned to the break-in hole, where he found an eager crowd. The invaders had run along the rope-bridge and gathered there in force, wrinkling their noses and cheering in wild exaltation. They had beaten the robots; there simply weren't enough of the machines on duty to resist a whole enraged population. The robots just weren't clever enough to out-think armed, coordinated human resistance—not without killing people wholesale, and they hadn't been designed for that. They had suffered a flat-out defeat.

Pete frightened the cheering victors away with a string of flash-bangs.

Then he took careful aim at the lip of the drop, and hoisted Katrinko's body, and flung her far, far, tumbling down, into the boiling pools.

Pete retreated to the first spacecraft. It was a very dispiriting climb, and when he had completed it, his shoulder had the serious, familiar ache of chronic injury. He hid among the unknowing population while he contemplated his options.

He could hide here indefinitely. His camou suit was slowly losing its charge, but he felt confident that he could manage very well without the suit. The starship seemed to feature most any number of taboo areas. Blocked-off no-go spots, where there might have been a scandal once, or bloodshed, or a funny noise, or a strange, bad, panicky smell.

Unlike the violent, reckless crowd in Starship Two, these locals had fallen for the cover story. They truly believed that they were in the depths of space, bound for some better, brighter pie in their starry stone sky. Their little stellar ghetto was full of superstitious kinks. Steeped in profound ignorance, the locals imagined that their every sin caused the universe to tremble.

Pete knew that he should try to take his data back to the glider. This was what Katrinko would have wanted. To die, but leave a legend—a very City Spider thing.

But it was hard to imagine battling his way past resurgent robots, climbing the walls with an injured shoulder, then making a four-day bitter trek through a freezing desert, all completely alone. Gliders didn't last forever, either. Spy gliders weren't built to last. If Pete found the glider with its batteries flat, or its cute little brain gone sour, Pete would be all over. Even if he'd

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enjoyed a full set of equipment, with perfect health, Pete had few illusions about a solo spring outing, alone and on foot, over the Himalayas.

Why risk all that? After all, it wasn't like this subterranean scene was breaking news. It was already many years old. Someone had conceived, planned and executed this business a long time ago. Important people with brains and big resources had known all about this for years. *Somebody* knew. Maybe not the Lieutenant Colonel, on the lunatic fringe of NAFTA military intelligence. But.

When Pete really thought about the basic implications. . . . This was a great deal of effort, and for not that big a payoff. Because there just weren't that many people cooped up down here. Maybe fifteen thousand of them, tops. The Asian Sphere must have had tens of thousands of unassimilated tribal people, maybe hundreds of thousands. Possibly millions. And why stop at that point? This wasn't just an Asian problem. It was a very general problem. Ethnic, breakaway people, who just plain couldn't, or wouldn't, play the twenty-first century's games.

How many Red Chinese atom-bomb tests had taken place deep in the Taklamakan? They'd never bothered to brief him on ancient history. But Pete had to wonder if, by now, maybe they hadn't gotten this stellar concept down to a fine art. Maybe the Sphere had franchised their plan to Europe and NAFTA. How many forgotten holes were there, relic pockets punched below the hide of the twenty-first century, in the South Pacific, and Australia, and Nevada? The deadly trash of a long-derailed Armageddon. The sullen trash-heaps where no one would ever want to look.

Sure, he could bend every nerve and muscle to force the world to face all this. But why? Wouldn't it make better sense to try to think it through first?

Pete never got around to admitting to himself that he had lost the will to leave.

As despair slowly loosened his grip on him, Pete grew genuinely interested in the locals. He was intrigued by the stark limits of their lives and their universe, and in what he could do with their narrow little heads. They'd never had a supernatural being in their midst before; they just imagined them all the time. Pete started with a few poltergeist stunts, just to amuse himself. Stealing the spangled hats of the local greybeards. Shuffling the palm leaf volumes in their sacred libraries. Hijacking an abacus or two.

But that was childish.

The locals had a little temple, their special holy of holies. Naturally Pete made it his business to invade the place.

The locals kept a girl locked up in there. She was very pretty, and slightly insane, so this made her the perfect candidate to become their Sacred Temple Girl. She was the Official Temple Priestess of Starship Number One. Apparently, their modest community could only afford one, single, awe-inspiring Virgin High Priestess. But they were practical folks, so they did the best with what they had available.

The High Priestess was a pretty young woman with a stiflingly pretty life. She had her own maidservants, a wardrobe of ritual clothing, and a very time-consuming hairdo. The High Priestess spent her entire life carrying out highly complex, totally useless, ritual actions. Incense burnings, idol dustings, washings and purifications, forehead knockings, endless chanting, daubing special marks on her hands and feet. She was sacred and clearly demented, so they watched her with enormous interest, all the time. She meant

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everything to them. She was doing all these crazy, painful things so the rest of them wouldn't have to. Everything about her was completely and utterly foreclosed.

Pete quite admired the Sacred Temple Girl. She was very much his type, and he felt a genuine kinship with her. She was the only local that Pete could bear to spend any personal time with.

So after prolonged study of the girl and her actions, one day, Pete manifested himself to her. First, she panicked. Then she tried to kill him. Naturally that effort failed. When she grasped the fact that he was hugely powerful, totally magical, and utterly beyond her ken, she slithered around the polished temple floor, rending her garments and keening aloud, clearly in the combined hope/fear of being horribly and indescribably defiled.

Pete understood the appeal of her concept. A younger Pete would have gone for the demonic subjugation option. But Pete was all grown up now. He hardly saw how that could help matters any, or, in fact, make any tangible difference in their circumstances.

They never learned each other's languages. They never connected in any physical, mental, or emotional way. But they finally achieved a kind of status quo, where they could sit together in the same room, and quietly study one another, and fruitlessly speculate on the alien contents of one another's heads. Sometimes, they would even get together and eat something tasty.

That was every bit as good as his connection with these impossibly distant people was ever going to get.

It had never occurred to Pete that the stars might go out.

He'd cut himself a sacred, demonic bolt-hole, in a taboo area of the starship. Every once in a while, he would saw his way through the robots' repair efforts and nick out for a good long look at the artificial cosmos. This reassured him, somehow. And he had other motives as well. He had a very well-founded concern that the inhabitants of Starship Two might somehow forge their way over, for an violent racist orgy of looting, slaughter, and rapine.

But Starship Two had their hands full with the robots. Any defeat of the bubbling gelbrain and its hallucinatory tools could only be temporary. Like an onrushing mudslide, the gizmos would route around obstructions, infiltrate every evolutionary possibility, and always, always keep the pressure on.

After the crushing defeat, the bubbling production vats went into biomechanical overdrive. The old regime had been overthrown. All equilibrium was gone. The machines had gone back to their cybernetic dreamtime. Anything was possible now.

The starry walls grew thick as fleas with a seething mass of new-model jailers. Starship Two was beaten back once again, in another bitter, uncounted, historical humiliation. Their persecuted homeland became a mass of grotesque cement. Even the portholes were gone now, cruelly sealed in technological spit and ooze. A living grave.

Pete had assumed that this would pretty much finish the job. After all, this clearly fit the parameters of the system's original designers.

But the system could no longer bother with the limits of human intent.

When Pete gazed through a porthole and saw that the stars were fading, he knew that all bets were off. The stars were being robbed. Something was embezzling their energy.

He left the starship. Outside, all heaven had broken loose. An unspeakable

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host of creatures were migrating up the rocky walls, bounding, creeping, lurching, rappelling on a web of gooey ropes. Heading for the stellar zenith.

Bound for transcendence. Bound for escape.

Pete checked his aging cleats and gloves, and joined the exodus at once.

None of the creatures bothered him. He had become one of them now. His equipment had fallen among them, been absorbed, and kicked open new doors of evolution. Anything that could breed a can-opener could breed a rock chock and a piton, a crampon, and a pulley, and a carabiner. His haul bags, Katrinko's bags, had been stuffed with generations of focused human genius, and it was all about one concept: UP. Going up. Up and *out.*

The unearthly landscape of the Taklamakan was hosting a robot war. A spreading mechanical prairie of inching, crawling, biting, wrenching, hopping mutations. And pillars of fire: Sphere satellite warfare. Beams pouring down from the authentic heavens, invisible torrents of energy that threw up geysers of searing dust. A bio-engineer's final nightmare. Smart, autonomous hell. They couldn't kill a thing this big and keep it secret. They couldn't burn it up fast enough. No, not without breaking the containment domes, and spilling their own ancient trash across the face of the earth.

A beam crossed the horizon like the finger of God, smiting everything in its path. The sky and earth were thick with flying creatures, buzzing, tumbling, sculling. The beam caught a big machine, and it fell spinning like a multi-ton maple seed. It bounded from the side of a containment dome, caromed like a dying gymnast, and landed below Spider Pete. He crouched there in his camou, recording it all.

It looked back at him. This was no mere robot. It was a mechanical civilian journalist. A brightly painted, ultramodern, European network drone, with as many cameras on board as a top-flight media mogul had martinis. The machine had smashed violently against the secret wall, but it was not dead. Death was not on its agenda. It was way game. It had spotted him with no trouble at all. He was a human interest story. It was looking at him.

Glancing into the cold spring sky, Pete could see that the journalist had brought a lot of its friends.

The robot rallied its fried circuits, and centered him within a spiraling focus. Then it lifted a multipronged limb, and ceremonially spat out every marvel it had witnessed, up into the sky and out into the seething depths of the global web.

Pete adjusted his mask and his camou suit. He wouldn't look right, otherwise.

"Dang," he said. O

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Danith McPherson

THROUGH THE WALL TO EGGSHELL LAKE

Danith McPherson works in education. Her stories have appeared in *Full Spectrum 4*, *The Year's Best Fantasy* and *Horror*, *Amazing*, *Space and Time*, and *The Fractal*. Ms. McPherson's quietly moving journey "Through the Wall to Eggshell Lake" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Beryl Bush

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The aliens in the basement were making noises. Jiggs heard them the moment he got home from work. After so many nights of unlocking the door and stepping into silence, the faint rustling caught his ear in a comforting way. The two little creatures were expanding the lake, a task sure to keep them busy for days while Jiggs contrived other things for them to do.

This morning the aliens had been satisfied with the fresh water oval a mile long and less than a mile wide that they had conjured up. Jiggs had to nudge them to do more.

"Must learn fast, Chiggs fren," the taller of the two aliens had told him, sneezing out Jiggs's name. "Must leave soon."

Jiggs had blinked away a twinge that wasn't quite fear, wasn't quite pain. Just when he thought he was beyond both, he would get these little reminders that the world was still flesh and blood and he still had to live in it. He had stood on the sand, hands on his hips, scanning the waveless surface as if he expected an idea to suddenly rise from the depths. He didn't know what "soon" was to an alien, but he knew he had to keep them here.

"This is no more than a puddle by Minnesota standards," Jiggs had argued. "What can you learn from that? But with a larger lake—well, there are numerous possibilities." Too vague. Incomprehension rippled across their bumpy faces. But it was all he could think of on short notice. Dangerously close to being late for work he'd needed to get creative. His mind had wandered to the lake outside.

Weeks before the aliens arrived, the fall weather had grown bitter, and the speedboat had gone into storage. Jiggs's first thought when he'd seen the aliens' puddle was that he wished he could plop the 19-foot MasterCraft right into the middle of it and cruise away the coming winter. Hmm. That had potential. The little silver oval was fine for swimming but would be cramped for water skiing. A boat would have to turn tightly to avoid the three sides of nothingness where the water simply stopped, cut off by the dome of pale, sunless sky as if the whiteness held this world together.

Jiggs had shaken his head. "Too bad. If we had a bigger lake, I could teach you about water skiing. But if you guys don't have the time—"

The aliens had stared up at him. Jiggs had wondered if the multi-slit eyes were really eyes or the lenses of some kind of strapless goggles. The taller one, Chicago with the sneeze at the beginning of his name, was as high as Jiggs's waist. The other one, Wichita with the sneeze in the middle, was half a head shorter.

"Water skiing. It's a sport," Jiggs had explained. "You haven't heard of it?"

"Already know swimming sport and Frisbee sport," Chicago had said, obviously skeptical that the human species would have the need for more than two sports.

"This is nothing like those, very different," Jiggs had said.

"Is important to culture like swimming sport and Frisbee sport?" Chicago had asked.

"Very important," Jiggs had said in his most serious voice. "The foundation of entire industries. Part of a ritual called 'vacation.'"

Chicago had bent his head, acknowledging the significance of water skiing.

Wichita had continued to stare at Jiggs. "Fuun?"

Jiggs had grinned. "Major league fun." Wichita was his kind of alien.

Now, from the gurgling sounds floating up the stairway, Jiggs knew his strategy had worked. He started preparing supper. His daily visit to see his son Ian had worn him out with inactivity, and his mind ached from being

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shut off all day. Factory work provided little opportunity for productive thinking. Usually he welcomed the oblivion and dreaded the hours in between; but to keep the aliens around, he needed all the think time he could get.

Eggplant, broccoli, lime Jell-O embedded with lima beans for the aliens; a microwaved dinner for himself. The aliens preferred their food to be purple or green. Jiggs sliced the unpeeled eggplant into a baking dish. Apparently taste was less important than color.

"Chiggs!" A sound like a sneeze came from the stairway. "Come. Seee. Chiggs fren."

Jiggs wiped eggplant juice from his hands and slapped the towel over a shoulder. He poured ugly chunks of brown dog food—guaranteed to provide the protein and carbohydrates your dog needs for that healthy glow—into a bowl. He grabbed the pot from the coffee maker. Dark liquid left over from this morning swirled cold. He poured it over the doggie nuggets and carried the foul-smelling stuff downstairs.

"Have good daay, Chiggs fren?" Chicago asked.

"Yaah, wasa bitch?" Wichita added.

"Yeah, was a bitch," Jiggs said. "And how was your day?"

"Bussy." Chicago's round face showed nothing.

Wichita twisted the right side of his face; Jiggs had come to know it as a grin. "Yaah, wasa bitch. Seee."

"I want to check Coffee first," Jiggs said.

"Yaah. Coffee dog." Chicago understood that there were priorities, responsibilities. That worried Jiggs.

The aliens led him through the family room, a remnant from when he had a family, to the room he had fixed up into a bedroom for his son, when he had a son.

Sharon had objected to the boy's demand for a bedroom in the basement and to Jiggs's remodeling plans. "You're mutilating the house to accommodate the child," she said in her superior tone. When that didn't work, she tried reasoning with her son. "Ian, dear, you have a perfectly *lovely* room upstairs." Which, of course, was the point and why Jiggs embraced the project with intensity.

Now the unused bed was stacked with stuffed animals. A vacant spot among the inanimate creatures showed where the red dragon had been. Three walls were bare. The posters had gone with the boy, rolled into a single tight tube and snapped with a rubber band.

Vacant spot. Bare walls. When Ian left, everything that was the life of the room went with him.

Outside the frozen lake creaked in the cold. Wind prowled across the ice desert and rubbed against the house. Prediction of two to four inches of new snow by morning. Jiggs hadn't seen the real lake in days. In the shrinking December sunlight he went to work in the dark and came home in the dark.

But beyond the opening that had once been the fourth wall of his absent son's bedroom a summer of eternal daylight sparkled off a flat plain of gray-blue. The aliens' lake shimmered with warmth and promises.

It was definitely larger than it had been this morning. A mile and a half across maybe before it ended, just ended, where the cloudless sky curved down and sliced it off. Jiggs couldn't judge the length. The side walls of the bedroom blocked his view. He would have to step through the transparent wall into the other world to see how much progress the aliens had made. He wasn't ready to do that yet.

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A dog bolted across the patch of sand that linked the ethereal concrete blocks to the lake. Golden fur rippled over muscles, perfect as a dog food commercial.

The dog stopped at the boundary between the two worlds and barked a greeting to Jiggs. Jiggs shook the bowl of brown nuggets at the animal with a slosh. "Dinner," he called. The dog pranced and ducked its head. It sniffed at the invisible barrier. "Come, Coffee."

The dog whined.

"Coffee, come," Jiggs commanded.

The golden Labrador stepped back then charged forward and jumped. It landed on the carpeting and crumpled into a heap with a yelp. Jiggs winced. If Coffee would just walk through, it wouldn't be so bad. The dog struggled to its feet, the two strong legs compensating for the two weak ones. It limped to Jiggs. He set down the bowl of food. The dog collapsed and began eating from a prone position.

Jiggs patted the head, scratched the ears. His strokes moved back along the dog's shoulder on the right side and became more probing. He checked the joints and muscles. Improvement. Definite improvement. The torn flesh continued to heal and the muscles gained definition. Even the limp was less pronounced than the last time he had examined the dog.

Wichita squatted beside Jiggs and wiggled a fat digit in the fur on top of the Lab's head. "Goood, Coffee dog." It burped and sneezed at the animal in its native language. Jiggs didn't understand a burp of it, but Coffee responded to it as well as he did to English.

It had been Coffee who found the aliens. They followed the dog home one day in October and Jiggs, having no one else in the big house, decided to keep them.

The place provided the perfect seclusion for aliens. What would Sharon think of that if she knew? She had wanted the elaborate home on the lake, the estate with a long, twisting, tree-lined driveway and a gate at the road to remind visitors that entry was by invitation only. Conrad Baxter I, Jiggs's grandfather, took care of the payments. Jiggs's modest trust fund and junior executive salary had barely covered the upkeep, the car payments, and the credit card statements.

Then Sharon left. She thought she had married Conrad Baxter III. Instead she found herself living with an adult who continued to think of himself by his childhood nickname. A regrettable error. For a time, she had devoted herself to correcting it, correcting Jiggs; but none of the training stuck.

The mistake, the original mistake of their marriage, wasn't really her fault. When they were courting and during the early years of wedlock, Jiggs almost had himself convinced that he *was* a Conrad, a Baxter, a III. But despite the suit-and-tie uniform, the genuine leather briefcase, and Sharon's coaching, he couldn't maintain the illusion. And she couldn't live with the reality—even before the accident.

Jiggs didn't know how the aliens got to Earth. All attempts at questions about spaceships and transporter beams were met with slitted stares. They chose the basement themselves. Soon the wall disappeared. Then the lake formed.

"Coffee dog better," Wichita said. "Marks gone from skin. No blood. Healing needed inside more."

Jiggs nodded. It was always the healing inside that took the longest. A few weeks ago he had spent a Sunday following Coffee through the woods,

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searching for a sign of how the aliens had arrived but not finding so much as a charred twig. A golden fall dusk settled over the bare trees. The damp smell of the first major snowfall of the winter was in the air. Discouraged, he was in a hurry to get home.

Jiggs took the most direct route back toward the lake, the real lake. In the late November twilight he didn't see the remnants of the ancient barbed-wire fence still clinging to the rotted post, a tired sentry leaning into the sunset. Neither did Coffee. The dog launched himself over the tilted stake, the Pegasus of dogs. Sleek. Beautiful. The unseen barbs clutched his hind leg, snapped him from flight. His right side smashing into the cold ground. He rolled, tangling himself in the thorny wire.

Jiggs carried the dog back to the house, sickened by grief and angry at his own stupidity. Another tragedy that was his fault. He should have taken a route he knew. He should have been watching so he could guide the dog around danger. He should have been born a different person, one with a gene for responsibility.

Wichita convinced him to lay the dog in the soft warm sand by the lake. The aliens leaned over the Lab and touched him with their fat digits, sneezing and burping in their language. They had grown attached to Coffee. Jiggs thought they wanted to comfort the animal. Coffee whined, in too much pain to lift his head.

Jiggs went upstairs to phone the vet. Before he finished punching buttons, he heard the dog bark. He slammed down the receiver and ran to the space beyond the basement, barely feeling the tingle of the crossing. Coffee held up his head and watched with painless curiosity as Chicago and Wichita manipulated his injured legs.

"Make one side like other side agaain," Wichita explained to Jiggs.

"Learn much fixing Coffee dog," Chicago said. "Must learn more."

Don't you ever relax and have a good time? Jiggs wanted to ask it. But he was too shocked to speak and too grateful to razz Chicago. Besides, if the serious alien was like the serious humans Jiggs knew, this was as much of a good time as it allowed itself. "Books," Jiggs managed to say. "On dog anatomy. You can learn anything you want." Between the library and special orders from the bookstore, he collected volumes with full-color, overlapping transparencies and detailed explanations. The aliens didn't read English any better than they spoke it, but they seemed to understand pictures. He could only judge the results of the "learning"—a whole, healthy dog.

In the basement bedroom the Lab lapped up the last of the coffee. Jiggs used to worry about the caffeine, but neither he nor Coffee could tolerate decaf. Having been raised on unhealthy but tasty table scraps, the dog would only eat the nutritious nuggets if they were saturated with his favorite beverage.

Jiggs finished examining the dog. The aliens' work only existed beyond the wall—in the impossible world where all things were possible. Here in the real world of the stark bedroom it evaporated. But natural healing took place and remained no matter where Coffee lived. Muscles and ligaments repaired themselves while the dog romped on the shore of the phantom lake. Except for these examinations, Coffee's recovery was painless. The activity and accompanying appetite definitely speeded up the process.

Jiggs carried Coffee back through the wall, shivering at the tingle. He tried not to think about his body passing through concrete blocks. They were there somewhere, even if he couldn't see them. Chicago and Wichita scurried after him on their short legs.

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The newly expanded lake spread for miles, a silver serving dish fit for a banquet. Wichita beamed with pride, literally. Its skin glowed with a slight luminescence. Jiggs thought of it as a blush.

"Major league?" Wichita asked, looking for Jiggs's approval.

"Major league, you bet," Jiggs said. He tried not to show his disappointment. The puddle took October and most of November for them to master. Expanding it took only a day. When the aliens learned something, they learned it well.

Jiggs wasn't ready yet. Unfortunately, the aliens wouldn't wait. He had to adjust his plan or forget it, shove it into that fragile, sealed place inside himself where he had put so much over the past year.

Chicago dropped one side of his face. Jiggs felt his stomach twist. Chicago was the decision maker, the one who had to be kept happy. No, not happy. Busy.

"No learning, Chiggs fren."

Jiggs put Coffee down in the sand. He knelt before the little alien, the dog between them. "I have much learning for you." He blessed every deal Sharon had pushed him into—each negotiation full of promises, each delay tactic, each dangling carrot he had ever used and cursed. "But first the lake had to be bigger. Much more learning now. Important learning."

Chicago kept the side of his face pulled down. He gave a wheezy intake-expulsion of air through the slits on the top of his head in what Jiggs decided was a sigh. Then he bent to again repair Coffee.

After supper Jiggs took the aliens into the family room and popped a tape into the VCR. The television screen showed a ten-year-old boy on water skis. He grasped the handle of the tow rope and used the tension in the line to cut back and forth across the foamy wake of a speedboat. The shot, taken from the boat, jiggled; and the churning engine dominated the sound.

Jiggs pointed to the screen. "This is water skiing." He tapped the glass. "This is Ian. He's my son."

The view changed to a steadier shot of boat and skier in the distance, the tip of a wooden dock in the foreground. The boat curved toward the camera and passed in front of it.

"This is a boat," Jiggs said.

The camera focused on the driver. Jiggs, face partly obscured by sunglasses and a baseball cap, grinned and waved. The camera slid to the right to catch the skier. The boy shifted his weight and veered closer. He dropped the handle and threw his hands into the air. Momentum carried him toward the camera. He suddenly turned the skis, sending a silver spray at the lens. The scene shook as the camera operator danced to avoid the shower. "Ian! The camera!" a woman's voice shouted. Behind the cascade the boy sank into the lake then rose from the water laughing. The woman's voice laughed too.

Jiggs stopped the tape. His shaking hand lingering on the smooth, black control.

The aliens sat on the floor with their legs straight out in front of them. Wichita's eye slits were wide. Chicago's were narrow.

Jiggs showed them how to work the VCR so they could rerun the tape. "We need a boat." On the floor he spread out the brochures, manuals, and diagrams for his 19-foot MasterCraft with the 255 horsepower engine.

Chicago pointed to the television. "Chiggs fren, you have a boat."

"I can't bring the boat into the house. Boat big. Doors small." Jiggs demonstrated by stretching out his arms then bringing his hands close together.

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Chicago stared at him. Jiggs knew he wasn't getting through. "This way you'll learn how boats work."

Chicago gave his single nod that was almost a bow. Learning he understood.

Jiggs dropped a hardcover volume on human anatomy next to the jumble of slick paper. "Study this, too. But don't do anything about it, don't make anything from it, okay?"

"Major league okay," Wichita said.

Chicago put his plump digits on the book and moved them up and down as if he played the piano. Curiosity would carry him through, even if he didn't trust Jiggs's motives.

The next few days the aliens stayed busy building the boat. Jiggs fed them, developing a technique for tinting corn purple and french fries green. He searched the public library and the local bookstore for information they requested as they worked. When the pictures and diagrams weren't enough, he read to them from the text. He found a videotape on engine repair that delighted Wichita.

He kept an eye on their progress while he advanced his own project.

The lies flowed like a delicate breeze. Jiggs had gotten a lot of practice lying during his marriage. He went to the Angels of Mercy Nursing Home, filled out the paperwork and handed over a check. He spoke of his hopes for his son and why he had chosen Angels of Mercy—those were the hardest lies. He said what the gray-suited, gray-haired, gray-faced, gray-voiced director expected to hear. The man nodded solemnly. His previous job must have been at a funeral home.

The words about slow recovery and steady improvement came from Conrad Baxter III. They weren't Jiggs's hopes for Ian at all. Jiggs wanted the real Ian back, the bright-eyed child in perpetual motion, the mischievous water skier who splashed his mother. No Earthly power could give him back that boy. Now. Immediately.

The hospital sent the records to the nursing home. Head injury as the result of a car crash. Swollen brain, hemorrhaging. Unconscious for first six weeks. Tracheotomy. Now able to breathe without mechanical assistance. Physical therapy required. Occupational therapy required. Speech therapy required.

Jiggs picked up Ian at the hospital. He was awkward with the wheelchair, glad an ambulance wasn't necessary. The staff had the posters tightly rolled and sitting next to the red dragon. The boy had made so much progress, they said. So much. They wished him all the best at the nursing home.

Jiggs looked at the unresponsive face, emaciated body, stick legs, deflated muscles, eyes rolling in different directions unable to find the same focal point. So much progress, they said.

Jiggs smiled. He had learned to endure unfelt smiles during the infinite business dinners his wife had arranged. That was when she still clung to the illusion that she could squeeze him into the mold that had stamped out all the slick, tense young men and women around the table with their practiced relaxed poses, their feigned collegiality. So he smiled and nodded.

And later he called the Angels of Mercy and apologized. The boy's mother found a rehabilitation center near her home that could provide opportunities for the boy. The mother feels, and Jiggs agrees, that it is the best place for him right now. He regrets any inconvenience he might have caused, and of course he didn't expect the considerable deposit he had paid to be returned since he was giving such short notice.

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The gray voice was very supportive of the decision. Jiggs was unclear if the voice meant the decision about Ian or about the deposit.

It took days, weeks, for the aliens to work their magic. Wichita loved having another creature around, and Chicago dove into the learning with the zeal of a fanatic.

By March Jiggs felt he finally had a life—not a new life, not a second chance at an old life, but the first real life he had ever had. He rushed home from work, eager to see Ian. He stomped clumps of spring slush from his boots. The aliens met him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Finished trees today," Wichita said with a half-grin and a luminous blush. "Wasa bitch!"

"Most informative," Chicago added.

"Ian son teach."

"What next, Chiggs fren?" Chicago asked.

Jiggs's good mood vanished. What next. Always what next. Each time it sounded more defiant, more like a challenge. The product of millennia of evolution easily mastered, then on to another impossible task. And when Jiggs ran out of ideas the aliens would leave.

Jiggs swallowed down the panic—that's what it was this time, not fear, not pain, but the same explosion he had felt when his fragile world disintegrated into glass fragments and metal scrap on that long, twisting, tree-lined driveway that was supposed to separate them from ordinary people.

Jiggs revealed a video tape he had kept behind his back. "Fish. Seaweed. The flora and fauna of a freshwater ecosystem."

Chicago took the plastic rectangle in his chubby hands and drummed fat digits against it. Jiggs smiled with satisfaction. Another temporary victory.

Wichita and Chicago toddled into the family room to study the video. Jiggs shivered as he stepped through the invisible wall.

"Dad, look what we did!" Ian ran to him. Ran to him on strong legs. He wore a T-shirt and swim trunks. Coffee scampered at his heels. The boy spread his arms to encompass the trees surrounding the lake. Without a breeze to stir the water the sleek speedboat sat motionless beside the dock, a jewel embedded in a gray-blue mirror.

Jiggs pulled a piece of paper and a stubby pencil from the pocket of his plaid shirt. He added "weather" to the bottom of the list. "You got the rest of the shore done today. That's great," he lied. "What about the fruit trees by the tent?"

Ian looked up at him with clear, wide eyes. "Done. Apple, orange, and peach just like you said. And lime and plum for Wichita and Chicago. Green and purple."

"Terrific." Jiggs had experimented with alien-made food. The nutritional value didn't transfer beyond the wall. The fruit trees were simply diversions for the aliens—and for Ian. "Now remember, the fruit here is for—"

Ian tipped back his head and rolled his shoulders as if he would fall down from the weight of parental concern. "I know, Dad. For taste not vitamins. I still have to eat all my regular food."

Jiggs could watch his son move forever. "Wichita told me you were a big help."

"They were doing it wrong. On the oaks and birches they made the branches bare. They said it was like outside."

"Yeah, I made a mistake. I took them upstairs and showed them the trees in the yard through the window."

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Ian dropped to one knee and batted at Coffee. The dog ducked, backed away, came back for more. "The books you got helped, and I drew pictures until they got the idea. Bet you had problems with them when they made the water, huh, Dad."

"Well, the lake wasn't frozen then."

"They get that the Earth rotates and all that, but they don't get seasons. No summer and winter in a spaceship, huh."

The boy took a few fake swipes then caught the dog behind the ear. The cuff became an affectionate scratch. "Hey, Dad, I've been thinking. You know how they call me son and you friend like it was part of our names? Well, I figure part of their names is a title, too. You know, Wichi is a 'ta' and Chica is a 'go.'"

Jiggs held back a delighted laugh. Such an intelligent boy. "Maybe."

"Think I can ask them?"

"You can try."

Ian looked past Jiggs through the opening into the bedroom—then he dropped his eyes to the sand.

"They're watching a video right now," Jiggs said, glad that his voice stayed smooth.

Ian turned his back to his old bedroom and faced the lake. "Yeah. Maybe I'll ask them later. Names and titles are probably harder than explaining trees anyway, huh."

"Worth a shot." Jiggs reached a hand toward his son's shoulder, then lowered it without touching the boy. "Sometimes hard things are, well, worth a shot."

Coffee charged away and returned with the Frisbee. He sat at Ian's feet and looked rejected until the boy took pity on him.

Ian took the plastic disk and sailed it toward the lake. Coffee galloped after it, ran to the end of the dock and jumped into the water, sending up a spray of fat beads. The disk slapped against the surface. Liquid vibrations grew from it and floated away. Coffee paddled toward it, pushing an oval wave in front of him.

Ian stripped off his shirt. He ran along the dock and launched himself into the water with a gleeful yell.

Jiggs had never felt so good. He abandoned his clothes and followed his son. Cool water enveloped him. It washed away the day, the doubts, the panic that was always a breath away now. This world was more genuine to him than the one on the other side of the basement wall.

The dog grabbed the Frisbee and swam for shore. Ian chased him, his sturdy arms propelling him through the water. The dog dropped the plastic plate on land and barked. Ian snatched it up. "Here, Dad!" He hurled it toward Jiggs. Jiggs captured it in flight. Caught up in the excitement of the game, he sailed it back without bothering to aim.

Jiggs watched the disk fly true in the breezeless air. Saw Ian, sparkling eyes intent on the spinning circle, run backward, anticipating its path. Saw the boy jump, arm stretched. His fingertips brushed the plastic then shrunk away as the force of the jump carried him through the wall and into the sterile bedroom.

Ian crumpled onto the carpet, his limbs withered. His labored breathing pushed his rib cage against the slack skin, defining each curved bone. Jiggs waded out of the lake, the water dragging him back. He ran toward his son. The sand gave way under his feet, slowing him down. The tingle of the cross-

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ing was a blast of winter. He knelt beside Ian, suddenly dry and free of sand. The boy tried to hold up his head his neck muscles were too weak. The scar from the tracheotomy was an ugly gash across his neck. One eye tried to focus on Jiggs; the other wandered.

"Chicago! Wichita!"

Jiggs scooped Ian into his arms. He was supposed to be home on time from the office that day. He had promised Sharon. No stopping after work for a beer with his bowling buddies—and why he insisted on drinking that awful stuff and why he insisted on bowling one night a week and why he insisted on having those people for his friends, she couldn't guess. But he did stop, for just one beer. While he sipped the tangy liquid and laughed at a tasteless joke, he invented a lie about a last minute something that he thought was taken care of but wasn't and he couldn't leave until it was.

Guilt set in as he drained the second bottle. He finished the third then sped toward home.

Sharon waited and waited. Then she hurried Ian into the car, determined not to be late for dinner with her parents. She punched the gas pedal and accelerated out of the garage. Her son sat sideways beside her, untangling his seat belt. The car was years old, but Conrad insisted they couldn't afford a new one.

Waiting for the electronic gate to open, Jiggs suddenly remembered the dinner engagement with his in-laws. He roared into the driveway. Swerving recklessly through the curves, he became confused by the conflicting shadows his headlights cast among the trees. He didn't realize another set of headlights was approaching fast, much too fast, from the opposite direction until his four-wheel drive Land Rover collided head on with Sharon's low, sporty BMW.

Afterward Sharon left, taking nothing. She didn't want the mongrel dog, didn't want the modified house, didn't want Jiggs now even if he could be Conrad Baxter III, didn't want the unconscious son slowly evaporating in a hospital bed.

Jiggs stood. Did he imagine it or had the boy put on weight? Were the stick legs less thin? Were the clawed hands less clenched? Were the brain and muscles repairing themselves? Was his son healing as Coffee had?

Jiggs hugged the boy to his chest and felt an explosion strong enough to bring the house down around them, this time an explosion not of panic but of hope.

He carried his son back through the wall to the tent the aliens had made for them. The boy was light; hope was a heavy burden. The little creatures scurried after him. The posters pinned to the fabric rustled as they entered. He gently placed Ian on the bed and nestled the stuffed dragon against him. He sat on his own bed next to Ian's and held his son's hand while Chicago and Wichita did their magic. Watched while they rebuilt his son.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Ian said when he could talk.

"It's all right. Rest now."

"I'll be more careful."

"I know."

"Someday I'll be ready though, right, Dad? I'll be healed like Coffee was, and I can go back to my own room."

"Yes. It just takes time for you to get stronger."

Coffee lay down on the fabric floor beside the bed. Jiggs sat and watched until Ian fell asleep. Then he slept, dreamless in this dreamland.

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He woke, not knowing how much time had passed, and went out into the perpetual sunlight. Chicago squatted at the end of the dock. Wichita floated on his stomach on an inflated inner tube, his head hanging into the water, feet twitching in the air.

The row of new trees bent around the lake. God created the world in seven days. It took less than a minute for Jiggs to rip his own world apart. The aliens gave him a chance to reconstruct it. As long as he found more for them to learn, they would stay.

And while they stayed, Ian's body had time to absorb the nourishment Jiggs forced into him—better than anything the hospital tubes provided.

And while they stayed, Ian's muscles moved and grew strong—better than the exercises at the rehab center.

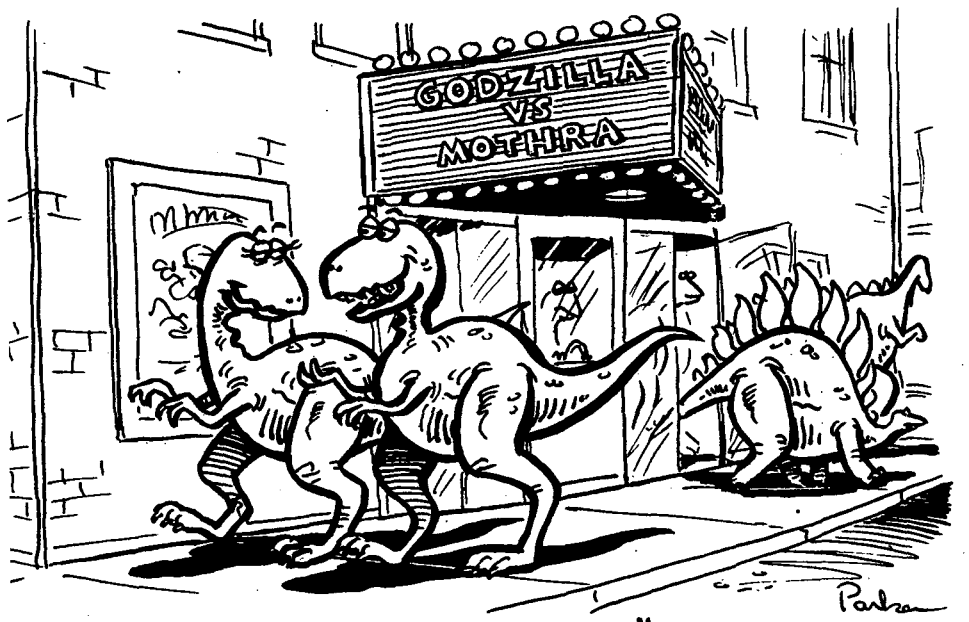
And while they stayed, Ian's mind was free in this strange prison, better than being locked inside a body incapable of expression.

And the day Ian walked through the wall and kept on walking, Jiggs wouldn't need the aliens anymore.

The smooth shell of the sky burned sunless. Jiggs was cradled in an egg of his own making, wondering if he could hold off a fatal crack long enough to allow a hatching.

Wichita pulled his head from the water and waved. "Chiggs fren. Come seee. Seeaweeed. Fich," he sneezed.

Jiggs crossed the sand, dragging his feet. He stopped at the plaid heap that was his shirt and pulled the list from the pocket to find out what was next. ○



"LOVED HIM, HATED HER."

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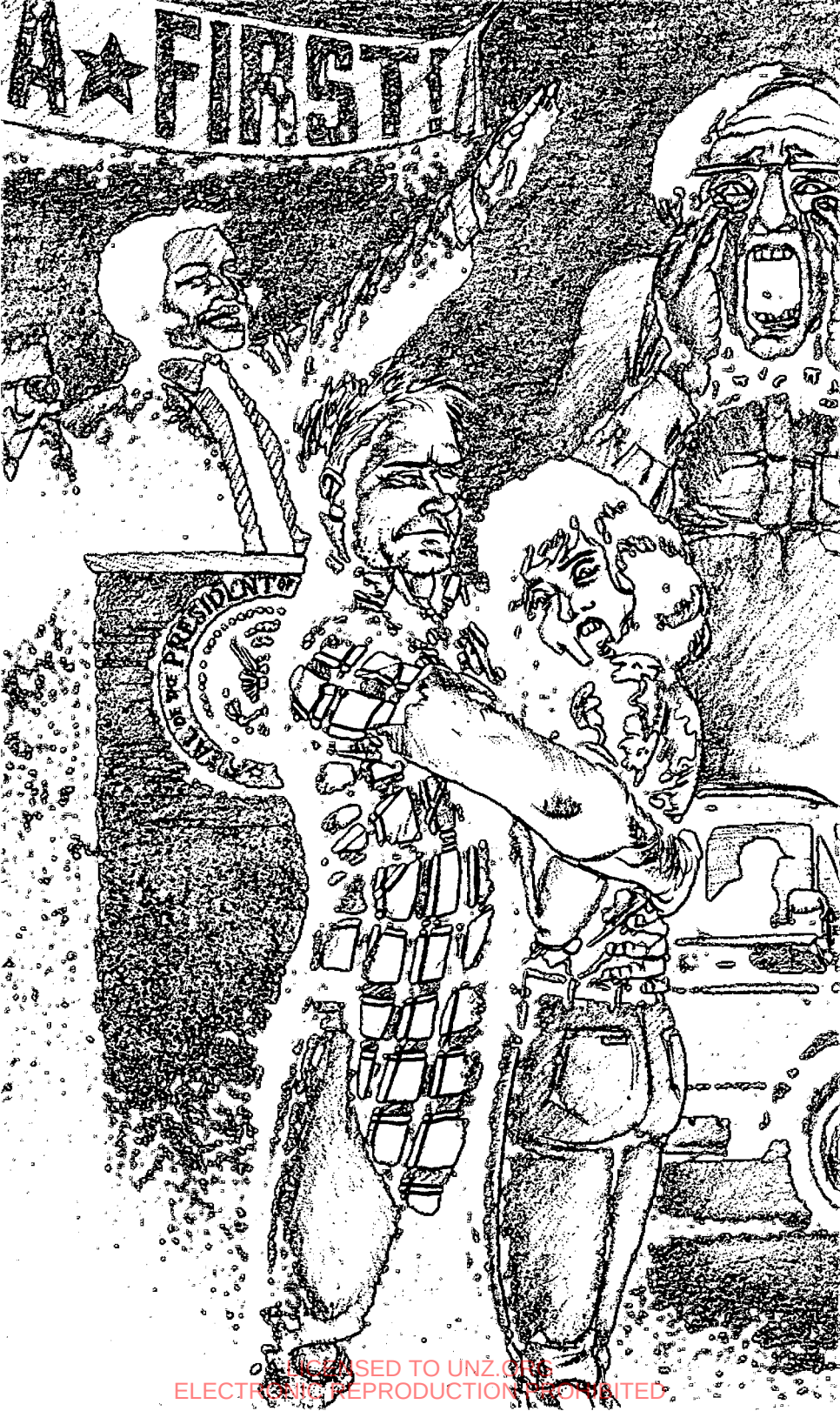

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R. Neube

QUANTUM COMMODE THEORY

The author tells us, "when I'm not misplacing things, my secret identity as vice president of the Cincinnati Writers Project keeps me busy. Currently, I'm working on festivities for our tenth anniversary. The board vetoed my idea of a human sacrifice. Well, it wasn't like we were going to use a real human. I thought our writers would draw lots for the privilege."

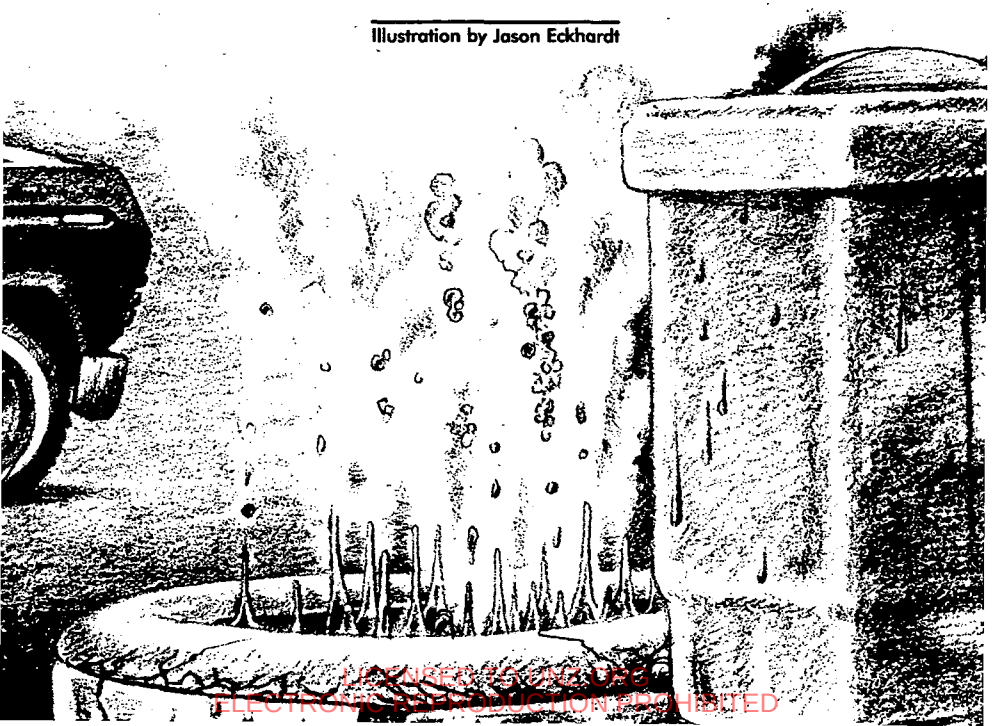

Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

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I turned down invites to two blowouts in order to work on a rush job. Fortunately, I'd picked up a diary dating from 1868 at a flea market that had ample blank pages I could cut and use. The ink was simple, though grinding the ore and mixing it killed the clock.

I didn't need much practice. This was my fourth Karl Marx letter, another billet-doux to the proverbial gal next door mentioned by a footnote in Krantz's monumental bio of the yerp. My client knew the letters were bogus, but he was making a mint peddling them to a Brit collector. As long as they appeared authentic and tested well, Hal could care less.

The only art required was making Marx's ponderous Deutsche come out sufficiently horny.

While my forgery gently baked in the oven, I poured myself a glass of Chablis and went to the john to ponder how I'd spend my eleven hundred dollar bounty. Basking in the glow, I decided to blow the whole wad on frivolous things, starting with a pair of lizard boots.

Then the toilet talked to me.

Well, maybe it wasn't the first time it talked to me. Merely the first time it occurred while my bloodstream was free of chemical stimulation.

"Luke Mitchell?"

I looked down between my legs, then jumped up. The water in the bowl danced, tiny spikes jumped up. The porcelain vibrated with a low hum.

"This is—" The water splashed higher.

Being relatively sane, I flushed. By the time the bowl refilled, I'd refilled my glass of wine. Sitting on the edge of the tub, I stared at the toilet and hoped the voice wouldn't return.

"I knew it would happen eventually. Enough toxic waste mixed with that chlorine and fluoride and *what*ide, and the water starts mutating. And starts talking."

Or had I finally blown my last sane brain cell? Aunt Gertie had spent most of her adult life in a rubber room. Wasn't insanity inherited?

"Luke? Can you hear me? It's Stewart Reynolds." The water danced wildly. The voice sounded as if it were coming from a cheap, buzzing speaker. Yes, it could be Stewart's.

I leaned forward. The water became opaque. Ozone assailed my nostrils. A whiff of steam rose.

"Talk directly at the water, Luke! We're using the vibrations for communications."

"Is this a joke?" I asked. "Aren't you in Europe with your twins?" I checked the bowl for wires or speakers.

"Is today April twenty-third, 1993?"

"Is this a pop quiz?"

"Speak louder. You must disrupt the carrier signal for the computer to register your reply. Luke, this is *serious!* Next Monday, Emily will disappear after parking her car at Florence Mall. Her corpse will be found the next day in the Ohio River. A serial killer is going to kill her! You must save her!"

"Why don't you buzz *her* toilet? Why me?"

"We've tried, you dolt! We cannot confirm where she spent the weekend. You're the only person we could locate. Court records showed you were at home on the twenty-third."

"C-court records?" I flushed the steaming water, needing a respite from this plumbing nightmare.

Once it refilled, the water resumed dancing.

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"Stop doing that! Luke, I'm calling from the *future*. We can't travel in time yet, but Professor Liu has learned how to vibrate molecules in the time stream. I don't have the time to explain. We're using more power than LA consumes in a month. Listen, Luke, I'm the President of the United States. This is my chance to save Emily. She should have come to Europe with me."

"What's this about Court records?"

"You spent the entire night forging a letter purported to be the work of Karl Marx that will be sold at auction for $80K. By the time the dust clears, you'll be spending three years in the penitentiary being built at Connorsville. I'll contact you Monday at 22.00 hours. *Save* her, Luke. Please save her!"

For the longest time, I studied the cooling water. Cracks cobwebbed the interior of the bowl. A headache settled with a vengeance.

Could it be? The toilet voice purporting to be Old Stu knew about my forgery. Time travel would explain *how* he knew. Were there other explanations?

"You're gone, Luke, flat-waved for the duration. You blew a clot while you were constructing that bloody awkward German syntax, and now toilets talk to you. Will lithium help? Or will it require a laser lobotomy?"

I took a long, scalding shower. The toilet was bubbling when I emerged dripping from the stall.

"Not again," I moaned, wiping the mirror clean and dry-shaving in an attempt to ignore my hectoring plumbing.

Stewart had been a royal pain in the posterior ever since I'd first met him. The rich boy had hired me to write his term papers. Was that my seventh or eighth year as an undergrad? Once he discovered I could fake ID's and attend Equivalency Exams as him, we became bosom buddies. I was the best friend money could buy; although "intellectual butler" would be more precise. He paid me to take classes with him. Writing his papers and coaching him in the Mitchell Cheating System I'd honed over the years upped his GPA from 1.1 to an astronomical 2.9. Not bad for a rich boy.

He didn't seem to be a bad sort, really, neither stupid nor lazy nor spoiled. Indeed, the main reason he couldn't be bothered with studying was his charity work. Be it volunteering at the pound or for Meals on Wheels, Stu was a regular glutton for social duties.

That's how he met Emily. Come to think of it, that's where he met *all* of them—those countless lovely loves du jour.

So, had Stu driven me insane? Or had it been Emily?

The mere thought of her name set me sweating. I could still hear her say, "You just aren't serious enough" that final night. Yes, I was good enough to provide a soggy shoulder and sympathetic company after Stu flew off with the Smithe sisters. Good enough for some midnight loving, during which she would invariably call me Stu at the height of passion. But not good enough to keep. I lingered hopefully, nevertheless.

Nowadays we shook hands rather than kissed when we met.

"Idiot! I can't afford to do this all night. *Talk* to me, Luke!"

It had to be Stu; the inflection of the bubbling yells was pure outraged Reynolds. He'd thrown a similar hissy fit in front of Professor Jacobs, managing to convince the dour instructor that he'd actually written his term paper on the evolution of German democracy in the post-war era.

"Okay, if I'm not insane, you can give me tomorrow's Lotto numbers."

"Liu says no. You aren't destined to be rich. We can't change history, Luke."

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"What are you blathering about? You want me to save Emily! Isn't *that* changing history?" My throat felt like I'd been gargling with sandpaper from all this yelling. The neighbors must be loving this, I thought. Crazy bastard spends all night yelling into the toilet. . . .

"Dolt! One person makes no difference, but twelve million dollars does!"

My brain raced. "How about the Pick Four number?"

The bowl gurgled for a few minutes. Would insanity make me wait? Only if I expected to wait. Bughouse doubts snagged me.

"Dammit, Liu, I'm going to do it. Four-Nine-Seven-Two. *Now* will you save Emily?" Plaintive wasn't a good tone for Stu.

"Only if the number pays off."

I was crazy enough to stay up the rest of the night, debating the time travel question with myself. First thing Saturday morning, I purchased twelve dollars worth of Pick Four tickets a buck at a time from separate outlets. I couldn't explain my paranoia, but it felt right being cautious. Not so cautious, mind you, that I wouldn't invest my life's savings on lottery tickets.

Crazier still, I tried to track down Emily. Her roomie mentioned a tall, blonde Porsche owner whose name eluded her. Gail was into cars; Emily was into tall men. Gail allowed me to review the contents of their answering machine. A mellifluous voice—Did I mention that Emily was also into voices?—reminded her about their weekend at a cabin.

Okay, I had a Plan B. Returning home, I sorted through my pile of pamphlets and found one that showed the floor plan of Florence Mall. Emily had a summer job at the Radio Shack there. It wouldn't be difficult to stake out that end of the parking lot. If she parked before getting snatched, I should have ample time to escort her to work.

Simple as pie.

Except, what was I going to *tell* her?

I slept the sleep of the insane. Plan B crazy. Talking to *toilets* crazy! I dreamed of the Smithe twins, with their unnatural blonde hairdos and their equally unnatural penchants, which had been lauded by Stu. We sat around a dream table while Stu explained how Emily must be frigid because she refused to make love more than four times a night.

Hal woke me at the crack of dusk, confirming my belief that Satan invented the telephone just to roll my carcass out of bed. I grumbled at the purveyor of dubious historical documents. My foggy mind swirled with Stu's comment about prison.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I blurted in response to a suspiciously incriminating question. What was he trying to do? My mind shifted into paranoid overdrive.

"That letter you gave me to *analyze* could be a fake. The ink and paper are right, as is the handwriting. However, it strikes me as hinky."

"What are you talking about? Are you on drugs?" Hal's voice slid up and down the scale.

He was taping the call! No wonder I had gotten busted! I could hear the clicking of the recorder as it sucked up my every word.

Not that I had any choice. Connections were everything in the forgery biz and I had but one—Hal Morgan. A sleazy connection who obviously kept evidence on tape to inculpate poor, hardworking undergrads trying to earn a few bucks. "Gee, Mister DA, if I help you nail the author of this forgery, will you give me a suspended sentence so I can rehabilitate myself?"

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"It's great to have friends, but maybe you ought to hire a REAL document expert for this one. When are you going to pick up *your* letter?" I asked.

Oh, my God, he *was* taping the call! I could hear it in every careful word he spoke. The toilet was right!

I spent the next hour guzzling coffee and calling every mutual acquaintance Emily and I shared. Nobody knew a thing about Mister Porsche.

The drawing for the lottery occurred at 7:30 on Channel Nine. My number on all dozen blessed tickets WON!

My stomach tightened. Would the Ohio Lottery Commission look askance on me sashaying into their office with a fistful of winning tickets? Would they ask me questions I couldn't answer? My blood pressure was coming to a boil as the euphoria of the win dissipated.

One call to Charlie solved my problem. As the campus's premier distributor of illicit substances, he was forever on the prowl for ways to show legit income. The IRS, not the cops, busted Al Capone, he was fond of saying.

We went back years. Indeed, we had been founding members of our high school's ANAND (Anarchist Nerds Are Not Dorks) Society. We'd shared the "least likely to succeed" award. Little did I dream then that they were half right.

Although we hadn't spoken in months, Charlie cruised right over to pick up the tickets. My old friend paid full face value for the tickets—sixty thousand dollars in small bills. I thanked him, swearing I would call upon him again should I need future help with my lottery windfalls. His laughing eyes told me he thought I'd found a way to diddle the drawing. I winked to add a little mystery.

It amazed me how well I slept with that pile of currency stuffed into my pillowcases.

Hal dropped by Sunday afternoon with my payment and a box of donuts. As surprised as I was about the donuts, he equaled it when I hugged him. Sure enough, there was a hard rectangular lump beneath his windbreaker. A tape recorder.

I launched into my amateur-authenticator spiel, emphasizing the doubts I'd had about the letter. Hal scratched his head like some cartoon character and hustled out with the letter, as well as the analysis I'd hastily typed up that morning. If he'd been recording me constantly over our three-year relationship, the shallow deception wouldn't protect me. But, if this was a new vice for Citizen Morgan, I might muddy the waters sufficiently for a jury to have reasonable doubts about my guilt.

Emily returned home Sunday night. As soon as a call confirmed her arrival, I rocketed over to her apartment on the fringe of the student ghetto. Plan C popped into my mind during the drive.

Gail had apparently told her I'd joined the maniac-of-the-month club. I could see the chill in Em's grey eyes—that "Couldn't we just be friends, preferably in different time zones" chill that ended our sixteen day fling. Stiff posture reinforced the coldness.

"Have you heard from Stu?" she asked, bringing me a glass of ubiquitous undergrad wine from a drum.

"Uh, I'm just the hired help. I haven't gotten so much as a postcard."

Not that I blamed him. If I were touring the fleshpots of Europe with the long-legged Smithe sisters, I'd be too exhausted to lift a pen, too.

"Nonsense," she snapped.

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She sat on the coffee table, twirling her legs, trying to decide which one should rest on the other. Her jeans were dotted with fashionable oil stains; I'd known her to spend an entire afternoon with an eyedropper, decorating them. When she crossed her legs just so, I connected the dots and realized they spelled Stu's name.

"Our Stewart is not that way. I bet he forgot his address book. *That's* why he hasn't been writing us."

The pity was that Emily believed every word she uttered.

When Hiram Boggs wandered across campus on a shotgun killing spree, Em commented how nice he'd been to his Saint Bernard. Her world was filled with saints and good-hearted, misunderstood folks. Victims of circumstance.

Emily would probably pat the serial killer's hand and suggest therapy as a superior vent for his rage. She'd tell him to "have a nice day" as he butchered her. I could envisage her telling Gabriel at the pearly gates that "the killer had a disadvantaged childhood, so don't be hard on him."

Perhaps her world was a better place than the grubby, venal realm I called reality.

I sighed, wishing we'd been a "we" a few weeks longer. Never in my life had I worked so hard to make a relationship work. I would have gladly been her substitute Stu for the duration, but alas, I wasn't serious enough. Hadn't she seen how serious I was about being a perpetual student? It wasn't an easy vocation!

I fingercombed my hair back, giving myself the ruffled look that I would need to sell my game. Everything I'd learned in drama classes came riding to my assistance.

"Em, what does it mean when you have the same dream six nights running?"

Okay, so sue me. It was a stupid ploy, but what was I *going* to say? "Gee, Em, the toilet told me you were going to get murdered mañana. Oh, and it gave me the Pick Four number, too." I knew her well enough to know how to con her.

"It must be significant . . . to you. Is it the very same dream each time?"

"In every minute detail." I made eye contact during the dramatic pause. "I know this sounds flaky, but I keep seeing you getting kidnapped tomorrow in the parking lot of the mall. Mannn, it is *so* real! I was wondering if you'd take me along tomorrow when you go to work. If nothing happens, we'll have a good laugh. But, if something did happen to you and I did nothing, it'd . . ." I sold it with a cracking sob.

And Ms. Himmler booted me out of acting class¡ Setting Claude's wig on fire was an *accident*. No-talent pyro, was what she'd entered in my permanent record.

"That's sooo sweet." She plopped onto the couch. From beneath a cushion she produced a can of Mace and removed its safety pin. Pointing it at me, she said, "Do you think I'm a moron? What's the shake, Luke?"

"You're not going to believe me, Em."

"Have you been following me in a black Ford van? Are you the one breathing on the phone?" Her finger tightened on the trigger.

I threw my hands up to protect my eyes. "C'mon, Em! I might moon you, but I'm too lazy to stalk you. I called everybody we know trying to head off this Monday from hell. Lookit, I don't have to go with you. Call in sick. Go visit your folks. Just stay away from the mall on Monday."

"Whose van did you borrow?"

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"Think it through. You're being stalked. I'm warning you about getting murdered. It's two-plus-two time. You've got to protect yourself tomorrow. Would I go through all this trouble just to harass you? We must have twenty mutual acquaintances. Have any of them, even one, had a bad word to say about me?"

"You're a criminal, Luke. I bought a fake ID from you. People say you're working for the Mustaches."

"*Me,* mobbed up? What a hoot. I skate some awfully thin ice, but not with those boys. C'mon, you *know* me. I'm no perv."

"How . . . what . . . why did . . ." As she sputtered the Mace can settled onto her lap.

"You want the straight line? The other day my toilet started boiling—not really boiling from heat, but from vibrations. You see—"

"Yours did that *too?* I kept flushing mine until it stopped. Nobody believes me when I tell them about it. Karl laughed at me."

I spilled the story, editing only my criminal endeavor from the weekend. She had no trouble envisaging Stu as the Prez; just as I had no problem believing that he'd subvert a monumental scientific project to cater to his own whim.

"What good will it do to run? Someone is stalking me. If I avoid him tomorrow, who says he won't come after me Tuesday? No, I'll tell you what we have to do *instead.* We'll have to trap the killer in the parking lot!"

"T-trap?" My throat went dry. The glint in her grey eyes was something I'd never seen before.

She hijacked my arm, bringing me to my feet and shepherding me out her door. "Be here at eight. I'll have a plan ready. Eight. You *can* count to eight, can't you?" Em's smile was warmer than the sun.

"Is that the number between seven and ten?" Much to my surprise she laughed.

I went home and hit the computer for some homework. Eventually, I snoozed out on the keyboard. My dream world offered a profusion of Metro buses that splattered me every time I stepped off a sidewalk.

Where was Freud when you needed him?

I arrived at her apartment at a quarter to eight. Since this was a police action, I brought Hal's stale donuts and some coffee. Emily answered her door wearing a denim jumpsuit. She grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. Gail was snoring like a Stuka on the couch, an empty pint of schnapps still clasped in her mitt. Her ass peeked out of her flannel nightgown, a single bead of sweat poised above a dimple.

I gaped until Em pulled me into the kitchenette. "Did you bring a gun?"

"*Me?* I don't do guns. I fetched along my baseball bat."

"He's a *killer.*"

"I've done my research. Serials aren't gunslingers. He'll try to con you, maybe jump you from ambush. Whatever his technique, he'll be keeping a low profile. You get his attention, and I'll work a little bat magic on his head. When he wakes up, he'll take off and he'll be out of the state in an hour. They're runners, not fighters."

"Are you certain, Luke?"

"Are you dissing me? I've exhausted the Library's database on the subject. Look, I have CRT eyes from staring at the computer screen! I'm an expert."

"Okay, don't get your Y chromosome in an uproar. You leave for the mall right now. I'll be there at ten sharp. I usually park at the end of the line in front of Lazie's. Don't let me down, Luke, or I'll haunt you!"

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Miss one date and she'd never allow me to forget it. "I will be there." I produced my pocket watch. "Let's synch."

"This is my life, not an episode of *Mission Impossible!*"

"Don't get your X chromes in an uproar."

"Did you notice any vans outside?"

"I drove around the block twice looking for our buddy."

"Good. My toilet broke last night. I thought I heard it yelling something, but I was too tired to get out of bed. Gail must have heard it, too. She doesn't get loaded at four in the morning very often."

"Huh, mine didn't say a thing."

"Never mind, Luke. It will take twenty minutes for you to drive out there. I'll stay by the phone until the thirty. Call if there's any problem."

I half-expected my engine to blow up or a meteorite to smash me as I drove to the mall. That was how the movies always went. However, Life doesn't have all those big-buck screenwriters working for it.

I parked across the street from the mall in front of the cineplex. I strolled across the busy road to the shopping center, hands in pockets, the very picture of nonchalance with my gym bag slung across one shoulder. The Louisville Slugger banged my kidney with every step. No black van was visible.

I'd been fretting about how I could wait without drawing the killer's attention. Outside the main entrance, a bus clued me to the bus stop there. Too cool! It departed and I leaned against the stop's pillar, upon which a schedule resided beneath Plexiglas. Nothing could appear more natural. None of the customers filtering into the temple of capitalism gave me a second look.

Emily's smoldering wreck chugged into the expansive lot half an hour later. Behind her toxic exhaust plume came that black van. The instant she parked, I began walking into the lot at an oblique angle, sufficiently distant not to threaten the Serial, yet sufficiently close to keep Em in sight. Slowly, I unzipped my bag.

Emily got out. Quick as a cobra, the van cut her off, stopping between her and a mall full of witnesses. I couldn't see! Whipping out my bat, I charged. It was a scant hundred meters. Wheezing and staggering, I made it in thirty seconds.

The serial killer was sitting on the tarmac, a knife in one hand, his throat in the other. At first, I thought he was strangling himself. Yeah, I'd been reading too much Stevie King lately. His grip loosened, and blood gushed.

Emily Burns stood like an elfin statue, with a bloody steak knife in her delicate hand. Her grey eyes burned.

"You weren't supposed to KILL him!" I grabbed her arm, and hurried her back to her car. My brain raced. I stashed my bat and bag in her car.

"He was going to kill *me*." She grinned weakly. Her pupils dilated the grey right out of her eyes.

There was a loud thump of a closing door. In my panic, I'd forgotten about Serial. He'd gotten back in his van and driven off. As he turned out of the row, he lost control. Maybe he'd passed out from loss of blood. The van collided with the bus I hadn't been waiting for.

"Two choices," I muttered, jerking the steak knife out of her hand and wiping it with a McDonald's napkin from my pocket. After checking for prying eyes—everyone was focused on the crashed van—I skimmed the knife under a car across the lane.

"He was going to *kill* me."

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"We can run and you call in sick, or we can walk right into the mall and pretend nothing happened."

Em smiled, a scary, determined smile. "I'm not anyone's victim. I have to stay. Thad has my paycheck. If I don't pay the rent by tonight, I'm out on the street. Stop looking at him. Look at *me*. See any blood?"

What else hadn't I noticed? Her jacket was splattered with tiny drops. Not so tiny in places. Huge globs, in fact. Streams! Had she wallowed in it?

"Here!" I pulled off her jacket and slung it over my arm. "I'll get rid of the evidence." I scanned her clothes, but the jacket had caught all the blood.

The wail of a siren hied us into the mall. After Emily went into Radio Shack, I scurried to the bathroom in the Food Court. There I found a shopping bag in which to stash the incriminating garment. I left via the Sears exit and drove home very carefully.

Emily dropped by after work. I pointed to the ashes in the fireplace, impressing her with my foresight by explaining how I buried the curled block of plastic zipper and charred buttons in the garden. Whereupon, I whipped a replacement jacket out of the closet. "I searched nine stores before I found a passable replacement. The lining is different, but nobody will notice that."

"Nine? I've had men buy me things, but not one of them *shopped* for me. Nine? You're simply amazing, Luke! Have you dined? Maybe we could go to Stobert's on the river. My treat. First, I need to powder my nose."

She walked over to the bathroom and closed the door. Her voice penetrated the wood like Superman's X-ray vision. "Which reminds me, do you know how much my landlord is charging us to replace the toilet? And . . ."

Her yell sent me scurrying.

"Are you decent?" I babbled, hand on the knob.

"Get *in* here! Are you waiting for an invitation?"

"Are you there?" asked the toilet. "The transmission is breaking up. Shout at the water."

Droplets of water seemed to vanish. On closer inspection, I could see them transforming into steam as soon as they vibrated into the air. My old friend Mister Ozone arrived with a choking vengeance.

"God, it really *is* talking!" Emily stood in the tub.

"You aren't Stu," I yelled at the bowl. Turning to Emily, I whispered, "They must be deaf in the future. You have to yell at them."

"I'm Xing Liu," said the toilet. "The President isn't here. He'd have me killed if he knew I was talking to you."

"It's your dime, talk away."

I offered Emily a hand to lure her out of the tub. Amazing, only a few hours ago she'd calmly murdered a killer, now she was spooked by a toilet bowl!

"If memory serves," I told her, "we're talking to the Einstein who figured out how to vibrate molecules in toilet bowls from all the way in the future."

The toilet was starting to smoke. I filled a glass from the sink and poured it into the bowl. By the third cup, it dawned on me that cooling the system might slow the molecules' zip. Reckon I'd have to allow the bowl to burn up.

"Your signal is breaking up." the toilet shouted. "Do you read me? I don't have much time. President Reynolds is insane. He nuked France because of a damn wine subsidy! His America First Party is talking about the US ruling the world. 'Foreigners should pay *your* taxes,' is his new slogan. Do you remember Hitler? This age has forgotten him. You've got to stop Reynolds before he starts! Stop him back there in the Past!"

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"Stu is Hitler?" Emily rubbed her sternum. The way her silk blouse kept rippling distracted me. "He likes it . . . rough. That's why I've been avoiding him. He used his belt on me."

"You told me *he* dumped *you*."

"I lied," she whispered.

Too much. My brain reeled.

"Reynolds won't stop until the world is destroyed! How can you . . . oh, my God!" A gurgled scream punctuated the sentence, echoing eerily from out of the toilet bowl.

We both leaned closer to the bowl. I noticed that the cracks in the porcelain resembled Elvis's face in profile, right down to that famous sneer. If I could drive the toilet bowl down to Memphis, I might be able to sell it for a fortune.

"Is that you, Mitchell?" The toilet bowl spluttered in a new voice. "What have you done? She's out of the archive, but she disappeared anyway. What have you done with her? You idiot! What did the Prof tell you? Spit it out, Mitchell!"

Greed cut through my confusion. "Give me the next Lotto number and I'll tell you what happened to her."

"You're *still* going to prison, you worm! I know where to find you. What treason was Liu telling you? I'll crush you! Answer me, MAGGOT!"

"Give me Wednesday's Lotto," I yelled, and flushed the toilet.

"What are you doing, Luke? He's crazy. His voice got *that* way before . . ." Emily went pale and sat on the edge of the tub.

"Did you believe Liu?" The fear in his voice sold *me*. I've been floating on the fringe of con artists and sociopaths most of my life. Of all the human emotions, terror is the hardest to fake. "I think he was sincere."

She nodded, staring at her feet.

I flushed the toilet again and turned off the water valve. It gurgled forlornly. Sitting on the rim with Em, I shrugged and we hugged.

"Now comes the hard part. What are we going to do?"

Emily's head wouldn't stop nodding. "I must have gone underground. How do you *do* that? Do you think the library would have some how-to books?"

"I've got a buddy that might help," I said with a grin. "Reckon it'd be best if we *both* go poof."

"What will we do for money?" Emily reached for the sink's faucet, then drew back as if a cobra had reared.

"That's where the lottery comes into play."

I'll never forget the look on her face.

We ran long and hard. I had hoped that saving Emily and not going to prison would warp history sufficiently to keep Stewart Reynolds from his life of political crime.

Em and I tried living together, but we never sparked. She changed her name and married a plumber out west. I bounced around, learning how to scribble Dickens and Lincoln. My main claim to fame became Mary Todd Lincoln's infamous essay on sexual delirium that was serialized in *The New Yorker*.

It wasn't a bad life.

Until Stu became the junior senator from Ohio. You see, *that's* why I shot him. Bloody shame I didn't kill him. Maybe Em will have better luck.

You do believe me, don't you?

Ask the toilet, if you don't. Maybe, depending on what future we get, it'll back me up. . . . ○

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DAD STREET

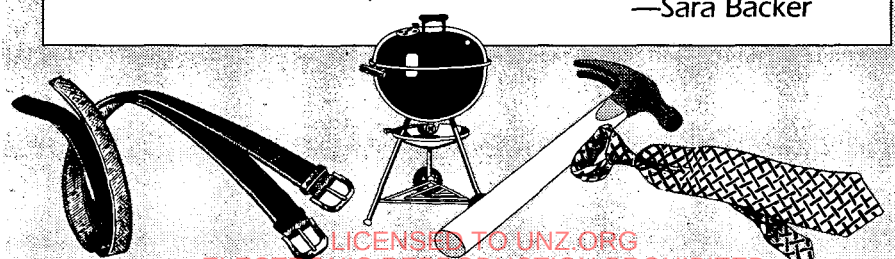
Walking down Dad Street, checking out dads.
There's Sad Dad in the suit, cuffed by a wrist watch,
manacled to time.
Here comes Fat Dad, putting on potato chips.
Watch out! Bad Dad is slipping off his belt.

Fun Dad takes the kids to the pool.
He's hamming it up on the high dive,
promising ice cream on the way home.
Done Dad grumbles about other people's kids
batting home runs through his picture window,
trampling petunias to find the foul ball.
Single Dad can't figure out why he lost
the gold medal of Parenting Olympics
to Single Mom.

Shingle Dad is fixing the roof—this weekend, godammit.
Power Tool Dad can't fix anything until he has another tool.
Tired Dad can't find his other shoe.
Fired Dad has nothing to do.
Inspired Dad knows how he can make a million dollars, really,
this time is different.
Barbecue Dad squirts lighter fluid.
Much Ado Dad elaborates.
Beer Dad pops another Bud.
Deer Dad shows you how to clean a gun.
Weird Dad dances in the lawn sprinkler—let his inspiration flow!

I'm walking down Dad Street, checking out dads.
I need more dads for my Dad Card® collection.
I need Pancake Dad, New Car Dad, Chicago Dad,
Stamp Collection Dad, and Cult Worship Dad.
I'll trade you my dad for your dad—sight unseen!

—Sara Backer



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Cory Doctorow

FALL FROM GRACE

Although "Fall from Grace" is his first tale for *Asimov's*, Cory Doctorow's fiction credits include stories for *SF Age*, *Pulphouse*, *On Spec*, and *Air Fish*. He's also sold nonfiction pieces to *Wired* and *Sci-Fi Entertainment*. As a college student, Mr. Doctorow received an honorable mention in our Isaac Asimov Award contest.

Lewis drummed his fingers anxiously on the nurse's station until she looked up at him. Her uniform, from white cap to sensible shoes, was like something out of a flick from the forties. A crucifix was sewn over her right breast, along with the legend, "San Rafael de Alajuela Hospital." Jesus. Hell of a way to start his vacation in Costa Rica.

"¿Si?"

"Do you speak English?"

She didn't. He just stared at her until she stood up and left. The nurse came back with a black doctor in spotless lab coat, with a gold tooth and big, rocky hands like a bricklayer.

"Can I help you?" The doctor had a deep voice and liquid Caribbean accent, like molasses.

"I don't know. Can I check out? I'm feeling better."

The doctor had a conversation with the nurse that alternated between his slow, deliberate Spanish and her machine-gun responses. Neither of them took any particular notice of Lewis. He rubbed the bruise from an IV drip they'd inserted between the spasms; "*Salina,*" the bag had said—saline. The conversation went on, with a general shuffling of papers on the desk and occasional consultations into an ancient telephone with a pink handset the color of a grubby prosthetic.

Finally, it wound down. "Your blood tests are positive for a staph infection, in your gut," the doctor said. "It is transmitted through your saliva, mucus, and," he paused, "bowel movements."

Lewis nodded and tried to look properly interested.

"You are somewhat infectious right now, and should not prepare food for others. You will soon experience very copious diarrhea, and you will have to take care to drink enough fluids, or you may become very ill. Please do not take any anti-diarrhea medication; it is important that the diarrhea run its course, or you may become very ill.

"We treat this with antibiotics. I will give you a prescription that you can

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fill at the hospital pharmacy. You must take the full course of the antibiotics or you may become very ill."

The doctor scribbled out an Rx and handed it to him with a smudgy carbon form covered in dense handwriting. He made his name out in the scrawl at the top of the sheet. "Take these to the accounting window on the way out and they will arrange for payment."

Lewis took it. He was lightheaded, but now, moving under his own power, he felt little of the panic-tinged busyness he'd been plunged into the night before, zipping around on his gurney with his IV bag on his chest.

The cashier, a Tico in a sports shirt with the top two buttons undone, spoke excellent English, and processed his Gold Card through a miniterminal that was as far removed from the phone on the nurse's desk as a surgical saw is from a flint ax.

Eric's phone number looked like it rang in New Brunswick somewhere. When all was said and done, it was easier and cheaper to pay one of the phone banks in that Province for a sat uplink. Once, he'd dreamed of getting a rope of fiber as thick as a baby's arm running through his camp, but the inexorable current of Tico bureaucracy had stopped him cold.

The only downside was that sometimes the caller ID got messed up in the transfer as incompatible protocols failed to handshake across his lovely Rube Goldberg, so that times like now, he answered his phone without any foreknowledge of the party on the other end.

"Jolly Roger Bank, hello?" he said into the speaker phone.

There was a series of pips and a whole Rice Krispies bowl of static poured down the line, and then he knew where the call was coming from, if not who the caller was. That rich, textured hiss, combined with the faint strains of a Peruviano pipe band and the bark of *chicharon* and melon vendors could only originate at one of the antique pay phones that lined the Plaza de Cultura in San José.

"*¿Hola?*" he corrected.

"*Hola,*" a gringo voice said. "*¿Poo-ede encont-rase* Eric Sigurdsen?"

"This is Eric. Who'm I talking to?"

"Eric? Shit! It's Lewis, kiddo! I'm in Costa Rica!"

"Lewis?"

"Yeah, Lewis! I'm in San José! I'm here, in Costa Rica, in San-fucking-José! Told 'em all to go to hell and flew down!"

"Why didn't you call me? I could've met you at the airport—"

Lewis blew a raspberry. "Fuck it, kid. I wanted to get the lay of the land, hit the casino, buy a box of havanas, you know. I been here, what, a week? Spent a couple of days in the hospital, even."

"Hospital." Eric said, keeping his voice neutral while trying desperately not to picture Lewis getting shots at some sleazy private *clinica* with years-old American magazines in the waiting room, never thinking to ask to see the needle come out of its sterile wrap.

"Yeah, some kinda killer food-poisoning. Felt like I'd swallowed a live chainsaw, no shit. Last time I eat raw fish. *Bad* mistake."

"Raw fish."

"Some kinda soup: sevitch?"

"Ceviche." Christ. You could get *cholera* from ceviche.

"Whatever."

Eric closed his eyes, removed his glasses, and rubbed them. "Lewis, I

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think you should come out here. There's, uh, lots of stuff you'd be interested in."

"Well, that's the plan, y'know? Just wanted to get my feet wet before I got into the work stuff, right?"

"Okay, you're in the Plaza de Cultura. Look around for the big board with the lotto numbers on it. See it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Go two blocks past there, then hang a right and go half a block more, until you get to the Soda Central. Have a sandwich, I'll have a guy meet you there in, like, forty-five minutes. You should be here before supper-time."

More pips sounded on the phone.

"Lewis, put some more money in the phone!" Eric shouted over the pips.

"Okay, okay. Soda Central, two blocks, hang a right, forty-five minutes, got it."

"Yeah. And don't change money with anyone on the street."

"Thanks, Mom."

Another cluster of pips shot down the line, then it abruptly died. It was amazing, actually, that the connection had lasted that long. The sat uplink and the old copper and mechanical switch system that they used here didn't handshake well. That was okay; pretty much no one called the Jolly Roger Bank from Costa Rica anyway.

Eric fired up his desktop and shoved in a CD with "PIX" scrawled on the top in runny magic marker. He quickly located a shot of him and Lewis in New Orleans, dripping in Mardi Gras beads. Christ, that'd been, what, seven years ago? He cropped out Lewis's head, zoomed it, and faxed it to Jorge's office, around the corner from the Soda Central.

He picked up his phone and hit the speed dial.

It rang twice, and then picked up, crystal clear. Jorge used the same sat uplink in New Brunswick; it was a necessity in his line of business. "*Pronto.*"

"It's Eric."

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Well. Good. Can't complain."

"That is good to hear, my friend. We're closing a big deal here, with some Jamaican guys. Encryption stuff. A very big deal." *Big deal* was Jorge's favorite English phrase. "When are you coming in for a visit? My sister just had her baby, you must come for the christening. We can visit my cousin at the national brewery—swim in the pool, play some tennis. You can stay in the spare room."

"Uh, I'm kind of busy, Jorge. You know, big deals. The reason I called—"

"You work too hard! You must come to San José and play! You'll go nuts in that swamp. Come to civilization."

It was always this way with Jorge. It was nearly impossible to just come right to the point with him.

"Okay, after Easter, I promise. A whole weekend. But the reason I called—"

"After Easter, then. I'll make a note of it. We'll take the week off!"

"Sure, right. The reason I called is, I've got a friend who's stuck in San José and needs to get out here. He's a gringo, can't speak a word of Spanish. You got anyone who can take care of it?"

"Of course! You need to ask such a thing? I'll take care of it personally!"

"His name is Lewis Tharpe. He's a good guy; he used to be my partner, back in Canada."

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"A bandito! I like him already. Where shall I meet him?"

"He's at the Soda Central. His picture's coming off your fax right now. Don't rush. I told him you'd be there in forty-five minutes."

"I'll be there. I will see you soon, my friend!"

"Thank you, Jorge, I owe you one."

"Don't be stupid. *De nada y con mucho gusto, amigo.*"

Jorge gave Eric the obligatory two-handed arm-pumping and effusive grins, but for all that, Eric knew something was up. Jorge was pissed at Lewis, and Lewis was embarrassed, their body language said it all. Jorge disappeared into the dorm to unpack his stuff. Eric knew he'd take one of the bikes into Santa Rosalita and play dominoes at the cantina until supper.

Lewis gave Eric a back-pounding bear-hug and ruffled his hair.

"Kiddo! Great to see ya! You're turning into a skinny little fucker!"

Eric plucked absently at his silk sports shirt and fussed with how it tucked into his pants. Each of his belts, all purchased before he came south, had several new holes punched in them. "Must be the weather," he said, and gave one of Lewis's love-handles a squeeze. "Maybe we can do something for you."

"Shit, I hope so."

Some of Eric's people came out then, from the low prefab bunker they worked in. He hadn't told anyone about Lewis coming; he hadn't known whether Lewis would be there for a day or a week, and besides, they had work to do and Lewis would sure as shit distract them enough once he arrived.

Felipe, a Tico who'd lived in the village when Eric first scouted it and who had taken to computers like he was born with one, wandered over, oh so casually. "Who's he, boss?"

Eric turned and addressed the group, a bunch of hairfaces and ponytails with deep tans and caffeine shakes. "Everybody, this is Lewis. Lewis, this is Cesar, Tomás, Fede, Felipe, John, Mike, Michael, Patricia, and Liz. Lewis used to be my partner, he's gonna stay here for a little while. Lewis, these are the guys."

Lewis solemnly shook hands with each of them. "Cool. Are they any good?"

Felipe, standing close by, said, "We are fan-fucking-tastic, Señor. *Superchiva. Tuanis. Excelente.* Are *you* any good?"

Lewis lit a cigarette and said, "Am *I* any good? Am *I* any good? I rip and kill, kiddo. I was coding when you were in diapers. Between Eric and me, we *wrote* the long-key standard you use."

"Used to use," Eric mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Cesar came up with a more robust application-layer protocol, so we rewrote the standard. About a year ago."

"Well, there you go."

Eric felt an inexplicable need to explain himself, like he was still the junior partner to a righteous codewarrior in Toronto, hacking away on a steady diet of pizza, Ethiopian food in styrofoam take-out clamshells, and coffee. "Well, I mean, we'd been using the old standard for, like, eight years, and you know, the datapath keeps getting wider, and Guillemette's last update to his fractal compression stuff wasn't compatible with it any more, right, so we just updated it, kinda. It was a cool hack, right, I mean, it's all server-side, it still runs on the old clients, so it's user-invisible, right."

"Yeah, sure. Of course. It was time."

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Patricia, a short, skinny Tica with braces and elaborate hair, who he'd hired fresh out of UCR's Ingeniera y Computación class after seeing her grad project, said "Oh, come on, Eric. That protocol was an old man. It was always complaining. I had to compile everything for it by hand, and even then, half the time it would crash our network. A dead dog, it was." Eric winced, but knew there wasn't any percentage in trying to soften her words. Patricia *never* backed down when she was right, and she *was* right, after all.

The other programmers spoke up then, telling war-stories about hacking on it. One of the hairfaces, Michael, an anemic, bare-chested Aussie whose skin was pocked with melanoma scars, said, "Unbelievable, mate. Just unbelievable. I'm not saying that you fucked up, just that the thing'd been patched and screwed with so many times over the years . . ."

"I get it, I get it," Lewis said, still smiling, but Eric saw a little strain in his old friend. "I mean, it's a hunk of code we wrote like, last *decade*, I don't care, it's not my *kid* or anything." He clutched his stomach and gasped. "Shit! Shit shit shit shit!"

"What?" Eric said.

"Fucking cramps." He was suddenly pale. "You got anywhere I can sit down?"

Lewis ended up on a rolling chair in Eric's office, riding the cramps for what seemed like an eternity but was only about half an hour. He shook his head and realized that he was covered in a fine sweat and his hands shook. He sat up straight and tried to clear his head.

"Jesus," he said.

Eric handed him a squeeze-bottle of water. "You okay, man?"

"Just cramps." He dug in the pocket of his lightweight chinos and pulled out his prescription. "Time to take my sulfa." The pills were like horse-tranquilizers, mega-mega-doses.

"So, ah, how was your trip up?" Eric asked cautiously.

"Some cop pulled us over and shook us down. I paid him a bribe, one hundred dollars for a 'work permit.' Jorge went apeshit at me."

"You *paid* for a *work permit?*" Eric said, before he could stop himself. The cops in Costa Rica might try to shake down tourists, but they rarely succeed. Usually, all it took was a cheerful offer to go back to the cop's HQ and talk it over with his superior.

"Jorge acted like it was the stupidest thing he'd ever seen."

"You don't need to bribe cops in Costa Rica, right. Just stand up to 'em."

Lewis grimaced comically. "Now you tell me." He grimaced again, for real. "Where's the shitter, buddy?"

Eric pointed out the door. "Straight across the compound, behind the dorms."

Squeezing his legs together, Lewis trotted away, chagrined at the stares of the codemonkeys in the windows behind him. He rounded the dorm and his heart sank.

The toilets were pit latrines, in little wooden huts, with half-wall dividers and lots of mosquito netting, and bamboo ventilation chimneys stretching up behind them. His guts fluttered and he plunged into one.

It actually wasn't so bad, he ruminated as he sat on a toilet-seat made from lengths of bamboo. There was tons of ventilation, and even a sagging shelf of laserprinted e-zines in Spanish and English.

He sat there until he felt like he'd emptied himself of everything he'd eaten

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since his tenth birthday, then pulled up his pants and struggled with the wash-station on a low bench in front of the latrines, a massive jerrycan of water and a bar of antibacterial soap under a piece of netting, and a sump-hole with a tight-fitting wooden cover. Eric wandered up as he was finishing and handed him a towel.

"You don't have running water?"

"We like it simple, right?"

"What do you do when the hole fills up?"

"Fill it in, dig a new one, move the sheds. It keeps us in shape, right, better than sitting around all day. We like it primitive." Eric's voice was filled with a kind of odd pride. He looked into Lewis's eyes.

"Say, you got the runs?"

Lewis blushed. "If you must know, yeah."

Eric patted his shoulder. "Don't sweat it, man. We get pretty familiar with each other's bowels out here—you gotta be careful. Drink lots of water. There're filters in the dorms, the workspace, the kitchen, my office." He handed Lewis the squeeze bottle of water. "We don't share water bottles, cigarettes, anything like that. Keeps the whole camp from ending up with the shits. This can be your bottle, it's a spare." He reached out and touched Lewis's nose. Lewis started back. "Just checking, man. You're getting a burn. We got lots of zinc paste and sunblock in the supply shed. The sun's a *lot* hotter here than you think; hotter than San José, even. You can get real burned unless you're careful."

"Thanks, Mom."

Eric's ears burned, and he headed back to his office.

Eric had the only private office. It was a small, prefab concrete building with netted windows, a screen door and a small fridge that whined all day and night, but kept his Cokes cold. He'd built the office himself, with three of the codemonkeys. It'd been surprisingly quick, just leveling the ground with a rented bulldozer, sinking the columns, and sliding in the wall pieces, the *baldosas,* with a rented crane. The success of the office had inspired him to order more prefab packages for the dorms and the kitchen and the supply shed and the workspace. They hired pretty much everyone in Santa Rosalita to help put them up, and in less than a month, the *campamento* was built.

"How long are you planning on staying?" Eric asked Lewis.

"I dunno, a couple weeks. Your invite still stand?"

Eric'd emailed Lewis with some compressed photos of the camp after they'd finished the buildings and installed the uplink and the diesel generator, inviting him to come stay for as long as he wanted. In the years since, they'd emailed back and forth at each other with diminishing frequency until it tapered down to automated mass-mailings at Christmas and on birthdays. "Of course! You can stay here as long as you want!"

"Cool. In that case, I figure I'll stay here for maybe a month, cool out. I can help out, too. I mean, I'm not trying to sponge or nothing."

Eric laughed. "Do you have any idea how low the overhead is here? I've got a ninety-nine-year lease on the land, the buildings cost bupkiss, and all I pay for is bandwidth and diesel. We all take turns cooking, it's a way to chill out and get away from the code for a while, and the guys are all on percentage, so so long as business is good, they're happy. And business is very, very good. The new protocol and long-key standard are making a serious buzz in some heavy money circles, right."

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"Whatever. I still want to help. Maybe I can do some cracking on this new protocol of yours."

That had been Lewis's specialty, finding holes in digital security and encryption wares and then figuring out how to plug them. He wasn't any great shit when it came to coding from scratch, but he could find a backdoor in his sleep. "Well, it's a little late for that, but hell, why not. We'll put out the fixes in Version 2.0."

"It's a deal. I'll need documented code, access to the LAN and a place to sleep."

Eric was the first up, as usual. The howler monkeys in the hills woke him with their alien hoots just as the sun was cresting the mountains and burning off the mist. The light filtered through the dorm windows, through his tented mosquito net, and he stood and stretched until he heard the knots in his back and neck pop. He struggled free of the netting and wandered out into his camp.

The smell of the place was incredible. A horsey whiff of manure from the surrounding farms, effervescent citrus tang from the heavy fruit of the orange trees, woodsmoke from cookstoves, and under and over it all, the heavy, mossy smell of the jungle.

He drew a bucket of water from the well and dashed it over his head, idly slapping away mosquitoes, wandered over to the storeroom and snagged a banana, then "patrolled the perimeter," making the grand circuit of his space, letting the feel of the long grass on his calves gradually bring him to wakefulness.

Into the kitchen then to fire up the gas stove and start water for coffee. This morning, he especially savored the process of brewing his own cup; a deal with some offshore money guys, late of the late Hong Kong, called him into San José for at least a week. He always missed these lonely mornings when he was away, staying in Jorge's walled household, where it was impossible to rise earlier than the maids and cooks who serviced Jorge's enormous collection of family, co-workers, associates and hangers-on.

He sometimes wondered if he couldn't just ship all these money-guys out here to the bush, build a guest cottage, let them get away from it all for a while and chill, meet his collection of codemonkeys.

But it would never work. These guys, with their linen suits and flip-phones, they would never make the trip out. These trips into the city were, on balance, a small price to pay for living the way he chose.

He took his java into the workspace. Long tables lined opposite walls, computers spaced at even intervals. They slept now, screensavers swirling through nauseous fractals or crawling with bugs or cycling through random montages of public-domain film footage. While he watched, six AM was rung in by ten different beep-sounds, a sixteen-car pileup of noise.

Lewis's laptop was wedged in between Patricia and Michael's boxes, surrounded with reams of annotated printouts. A week before Lewis had arrived, the printer had been disconnected from the network—moved by someone who needed more space. No one noticed. Everyone here worked off hulking twenty-seven inch monitors, keeping their notes in searchable, mailable, archiveable digital format. Lewis had exhausted the camp's supply of paper in four days, and they'd had to send Michael to the *papelería* in Upala, sixty klicks off, for more.

He found himself grinning and caught his reflection in a monitor. He looked like a kid in candyland.

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* * *

These guys were getting to Lewis. Their eyes burned into his back whenever he turned it. They fell silent whenever he joined their conversations. Every time he looked, the cots closest to his in the men's dorm had inched farther away. Wouldn't be so bad if they all weren't so chummy, casually slipping arms over each other's shoulders, hugging, joking. It was enough to give him a serious hate-on.

He tried to hide it as he pored over his notes, occasionally leaning over his laptop to type one-handed and test this line of attack or that.

Meanwhile, the monkeys chattered around him, firing Nerf darts at each other or shouting raunchy insults in hybrid Spanglish.

And the shoulder-surfing! Every time he turned around, one of the kids was leaning over him, reading his notes, checking out his screen. He ignored them as best as he could, but when they commented—

"Don't bother with that, mate," Michael said. "I wrote the memory overflow routines; we trap any off-stack pointers with a 60 nanosecond cycle garbage collector. It's an instantiation off CryptWare's object library."

"Really? CryptWare? Wow. Big deal. I was codebreaker for all the CryptWare betas from version 0.96 to 8.0." He'd found at least five holes in each iteration, and billed them plenty for it. Lanny Shapiro, the CEO, had once told him over beers that he'd saved the company at least a billion in hacker losses.

"Oh. Well, go for it, then." Michael wandered off, but in his peripheral vision, Lewis saw Patricia make a face at him and saw Michael return it with a knowing look.

He worked for a measured fifteen minutes more, his concentration broken, before heading off to the loo.

The food-poisoning was still there, a lightness in his stomach that twinged occasionally, and sent him running off to the latrines. He was most of the way through his antibiotics and, though he wouldn't admit it, worried.

He used the washstand afterward and decided not to return to the workspace. Instead, he struck off on one of the trails through the bush, headed into Santa Rosalita, where he could get a Coke in the *pulpería,* a sort of general store, or a beer in the cantina.

He was nursing his second beer when Michael wandered into the cantina. The Australian codemonkey had come from Sydney on one of those five-year world-spanning vacations that every Aussie he met seemed to be in the middle of. He'd shlepped up the Pacific coast with his surfboard under one arm, looking for a curl that would put the monster waves of his Bondi Beach stomping grounds to shame. He'd met Eric and a couple of the guys, taking some downtime on a patio with big frosty drinks, and Eric had invited him up to the camp for a visit. Like most of the monkeys in the camp, he'd come for a visit and stayed on indefinitely.

Somehow, Lewis didn't think he'd be one of the ones that stayed.

He walked in, made a curt nod at Lewis, then went to the bar and had an animated discussion with the bartender in mangled Spanish, then came back to Lewis's table with a can of Pacifica and a box of checkers.

"You mind?"

Lewis made a sweeping gesture with one hand. He was almost relieved to see Michael. He'd been sitting there for half an hour, trying to ignore the stares of the old men who played dominoes there through the hot afternoons, and thinking of the bars in San José, full of laughing tourist kids with their

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backpacks, and the necklace and pot dealers who preyed on them and spoke fluent English.

"Chilling out?" Lewis asked.

"Yeh. I'm instantiating some of CryptWare's stuff for these music publishers, nailing down a fingerprint routine that'll let them track pirates."

"Fun stuff." Lewis grinned wryly.

"Yeh. Want to play?" Without waiting for a reply, he unboxed the checkers, bottlecaps painted red and white, and started arranging them on the board painted on the table's surface.

They played three rounds in silence, and Lewis found himself growing terribly engrossed in the match, winning two and losing one. After completing the third round, his guts twitched and he gasped and made a dash for the latrine.

Michael had a couple of fresh beers waiting when he returned. "You look like shit."

"You should see the outhouse."

"Got the trots, hey?"

"Just a little."

"I had a bad bout two years ago, in Chile. I was up in the mountains with some mates, and it was the middle of a cholera epidemic. Thought I was going to die, no shit." He barked a little laugh. "Well, lots of shit, actually."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure. How's the work coming? Find any flaws in my handiwork yet?"

"To be honest, no. That thing's pretty tight." Lewis raised his can and clinked it with Michael's. "Good stuff. I know I'll find some, though. Nothing's perfect."

"Too right. Eric says that you're pretty hot, yeh?"

"I suppose so. I've done some good stuff."

"Like?"

"Oh, hell, nothing you'd have heard of. This was all, like, ten-fifteen years ago. Most of it's obsolete now, and what isn't has been upgraded half a dozen times."

"That's the way. Nothing lasts more than ten seconds."

"Tell me about it! I worked for this startup once, developing a CD-ROM for a version of Windows that was taken off the market before we shipped! Fucking Bill fucking Gates."

"You knew him?"

"Major prick. I met him once at Comdex. . . ."

When they returned to the camp, they were lit up like Christmas trees, staggering in the twilight, slipping on the muddy road. Patricia intercepted them.

"Where's the stuff for the music publishers?" she asked, pointedly.

"Right here," Michael said, tapping his temple drunkenly. "Right here."

"You know it's due tomorrow morning."

"So it is. It will be late."

Patricia swore in Spanish. "Goddamnit! Just because Eric is gone, doesn't mean you can go and be a drunk. We're here to *work,* remember?"

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. One day won't make a difference. It'll all be obsolete in ten years," Lewis said, hitching up his pants.

"You!" Patricia whirled on him. "You be quiet. You, I don't want to hear from. Why are you even here, señor dinosaur? A little vacation? It certainly can't be to work!"

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"What's that supposed to mean? I'm working!"

"Working? Is that what you call it? Looks to me like you're fucking the dog. Working means that you actually produce something, besides a mess."

"Patricia, be quiet, okay? Lewis is doing important stuff. You don't have any reason to shit on him," Michael said.

"Bullshit! You said yourself that he was useless." She turned to Lewis. "Look, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, but we're here to work. We trust each other. You may have a job to do—Eric says you know what you're doing—but you don't act like it. Michael, you don't even have an excuse: you know better."

Lewis felt his stomach sink. The other codemonkeys were trickling by, pretending not to notice, but he knew that they were all nodding inside. Patricia faced him, arms folded. Without saying another word, he turned and trudged to the latrines.

"Leaving?" Eric asked. "Why are you leaving? You just got here."

"Time for me to go, kiddo. Wore out my welcome." Lewis continued to walk briskly on the country road, headed for the bus stop. His shoulder bag with his laptop clunked against his thigh, and he carried his water bottle in one hand. His shirt was gummed to his back with sweat, and humidity choked him with each breath.

"Wore out your welcome? Ridiculous! Look, Michael told me what happened, I'll talk to Patricia. I *want* you to stay. I need you here—somebody's gotta find the bugs, right?"

"You can find the bugs, Eric. It's been a month, anyway. Time for me to get home."

"And do what?"

Lewis wasn't thinking about that. His savings would carry him for about a year, and he had equity in a dozen companies that had paid him in stock instead of cash when they were startups. He hadn't checked on their value lately, but they'd probably carry him for another year, at least. "I'll do whatever needs doing, same as always. Don't worry about me, I can take care of myself." As if to prove him wrong, his bowels spasmed then, and he clenched them shut, hoping that he could make it to the latrine at the *pulpería* in Santa Rosalita.

"Come on, man, don't do this."

The skies, which had been darkening for the previous hour, chose that moment to open up with a tremendous thunderclap. The rain poured in sheets, a classic lowland storm, refreshing and soaking Lewis to the skin. His shoulder-bag was waterproof, but the dirt road was rapidly turning into mud.

"Come on, don't do this," Eric said again. "Look, if you want to go, that's fine, right? I don't like it, but fine. But don't go like this. Let me give you a lift into San José. I'll book off for a while, we'll head down to Playa Samura and sit on the beach for a couple days. Check out the sights. There're some waterfalls around there, they'll blow your mind. Let me thank you properly for the help you've given us."

Lewis trudged on a few more meters, nearly blinded by rain, until his feet started sinking in to the ankles in the mud. He stopped and spoke into the rain. "Okay. That sounds better than this, anyway. Thanks, kiddo."

Eric left Lewis alone in his office to change into dry clothes. There was a mirror on the back of the door, and as Lewis toweled off, he caught sight of himself in it. It stopped him cold.

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His hair was grown out, shaggy on his shoulders, and he had a three-day beard. His skin was a rich, teaky, glowing brown. His waist—hell, his whole body—was thinner, better-muscled, more defined than it had been in twenty years. Amazed, he poked at where his belly had been, and felt the hardness there. He looked at his legs, bulging with thick quads from the endless walking he did here.

He looked like fucking Indiana Jones.

A smile split his face, and it was rakish and piratical as hell.

He finished getting dressed, then went out to find Eric and tell him he'd changed his mind about leaving.

A month later Eric returned to the camp from another business meeting in San José, and found Lewis throwing a party.

It was in full swing as he careened along the potholed access-road, audible from three klicks' distance. Novelty jazz, from the fifties—all vibraphone and marimba and cha-cha beats—playing through the computers' speakers. Eric killed the engine and stopped to listen for a moment. He heard drunken voices, loud and indistinct and happy. He toyed with his cellphone and thought about calling down to the camp, letting them know he was on the way, give them a chance to sober up before the boss got there. He could easily kill an hour here in the dark, watching the stars whirl through the breaks in the jungle cover, listening to the night-sounds of the frogs and insects and monkeys around him. Lewis's laughter ricocheted off the edges of the valley and back to him, and it sounded so happy that he turned on the ignition and floored it back to camp.

He rolled in with his highbeams on, killed the engine and jumped out, grinning, searching for the partiers. This close, the music from the work-building—a mambo version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow—" was nearly deafening. It played from twenty speakers, out of every computer in the camp. He wandered into the work-building, but it was empty. One wall was covered in taped-up sheets of paper, scrawled with Lewis's handwriting.

He leaned over one of the machines and jiggled the trackball to wake up the screen. It was playing tunes off of Buena Nota, the Tico subsidiary of the Korean music-on-demand service that was the principal competitor of the service they'd been working for.

Curiouser and curiouser, he thought, and started systematically searching for the revelers. While in his office, he stooped to grab a six-pack out of his fridge, and found it cleaned out—they'd beaten him to it. He laughed and resumed his search. This close to the music, though, it was hard to pinpoint the distant laughter. Finally, he saw that the south gate was open. The south gate led to the trail that led to the crick, a little muddy thing in the dry season, and a brisk river in the rainy season. Eric heard splashing, and took off down the trail.

Lewis and the others were in the river, gurgling and giving each other piggy-back rides and partying their asses off. In the moonlight, they were ghostly, oily figures, disappearing beneath the water's surface, then reappearing, spouting water into the air. A litter of beer cans was stacked by the bank. Eric stood in the shadows for a moment and breathed in the night air and listened to the happy noise of his team, and thought he must be the luckiest man on Earth. He stepped forward and folded his arms, trying to keep the smile off his face.

One by one, the codemonkeys noticed him and fell silent. Finally, Lewis

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was the only one still horsing around, diving to the bottom, then shooting up out of the water. Eric saw that he was only wearing a pair of boxer shorts and that he could count his ribs.

"Hi guys, what's up?" Eric said, when Lewis finally noticed him.

"Eric!" Lewis shouted. "'Bout time you got here! Get naked, buddy, and come on in, the water's fine!"

"I don't think so, pal."

"Aw, come on, you big sissy! Get your narrow white ass down here! *¡Pronto!*"

The others joined in then, calling him down. Eric shook his head and stepped into the shadows, then stripped down to his underwear, leaving his clothes in a neatly folded pile in the roots of one of the big trees that overhung the river. Gingerly, he picked his way down the muddy bank and stepped into the water. It was refreshingly cool.

The codemonkeys cheered and Lewis swam underneath him and hoisted him up on his shoulders. Eric waved his arms for balance, then lost it and tipped over backward into the water. *I have not had enough beer for this,* Eric thought.

He resurfaced and sneezed water out of his sinuses, then, infected by his employees' giddiness, jumped up and dunked Lewis.

This sparked a drunken free-for-all that lasted for another half-hour until, out of breath, Eric crawled back up the bank and flopped on his back, staring up at the stars. *I guess Lewis is starting to fit in,* he thought, and snorted a little laugh.

Lewis climbed up the bank and flopped down beside him, his chest heaving.

"Why the celebration, Lew?"

"Nothin' much, kiddo. Only just that I made you a big ole *pile* of money. I'm so smart, I *scare* myself."

Eric leaned up on one elbow, looking Lewis in the face. Lewis wore a huge, maniacal grin. "Do tell."

"Well, it goes like this. I found a major hole in the CryptWare stuff we've been using. Very subtle, but *big*. The fingerprint routine object is descended from an old communications toolkit object, dating back twenty years. So it inherits all the behaviors of that object, right? Well, one of those behaviors is a programmer's backdoor, totally undocumented, that lets you reset the object's preferences. Can you guess what happens when you apply that to the CryptWare fingerprint object?"

Eric thought about it. "You can set the encryption key to null . . . right? Then everything we use to track who's paid for what tune goes out the window, which means—"

"Very good, Young Grasshopper. It means pirate-city, I said *booty,* buh-buh-buh-*booty*. Anyone using CryptWare for transaction security might as well be *giving* it away."

Eric sat up. "Fuck! That means that everything we've done is no good! We shipped *last week,* Lewis, we're dead!"

Lewis laughed. "Hey, Michael, c'mere buddy. Explain to Eric why we're not dead?"

The Aussie sauntered over and crouched down on his haunches beside them. "Oh, you won't believe this, bro. Your mate here, he's a *sly* one! He patched the hole in our stuff and uploaded it before he told us a thing about it. Just cracked my password and *uploaded* it, thank you very much. Then he calls a meeting and explains it to us, and lets us panic all afternoon while we

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make sure what he's saying is right. He is. So we're going *spare,* running 'round like chickens with their heads cut off, and he tells us about his fix, then you know what he does? He shows us a bloody *press release* about it."

Eric jolted. "You issued a *press release?*"

Lewis laughed. "Put your eyes back in your head, kiddo. Yeah, I issued a press release. About how the *other* guys are using this shitty security system, and how we've fixed it. *Variety* picked it up immediately, so did the American Federation of Musicians' house organ. The competition have already lost half of their artists, jumped ship for our guys. That's why we're listening to this shit—it's the only music left on Buena Nota! I worked out your commission on this. Six figures, buddy. Not low six figures, either. *High* six figures. *Damn,* I'm good."

"We're listening to *pirated* music?"

"Sure, why not? We're the Jolly Rogers, right?"

Eric collapsed onto his back and stared at the sky.

"So, whatcha think, kiddo?"

"I think . . . I think I need a beer."

"Get this man a brew!"

The fever hit Lewis like a freight train. He woke up in his bed in the men's dorm and opened his eyes, wondering what the hell was squeezing his head. The room whirled around him, and he barely had time to get his head over the edge of the bunk before a river of puke roared out of his mouth.

"Jesus jesus jesus," he moaned, and a wave of cold washed over his sweat-soaked body. His teeth began to chatter. He puked again, and the sound echoed in his ears, continuing even after he stopped. He could no longer feel the bunk underneath him. *This can't be good,* he thought.

"—okay-kay?" a voice said, near him, echoing in his skull.

"This can't be good," he moaned. Someone took his hand. The shivering and cold amplified within him. Colored lights chased each other behind his eyelids.

"Lewis-ewis?" a voice said. He couldn't tell if it was the same one.

"What?" he said, his voice louder than a shout in his ears.

"It's Eric-ric. Tell-ell me what's happening-ing."

"I'm puking and I can't hear right and I can't see right and my head is spinning. This can't be good." The bed was warm and wet underneath him, and distantly, he felt his bowels fluttering and knew that he'd shat himself. He groaned again, and dry-swallowed.

He felt a prick at his arm, and then someone held a glass to his lips. He sipped, gingerly, then threw up again. When he'd finished, he felt fingers forcing a pill into his mouth. He swallowed, than drank some more water from the glass that reappeared at his lips.

After that, he remembered nothing else.

The morning came with hyperreal clarity, sun flooding into the familiar surroundings of Eric's office. He was on a folding cot, naked under clean sheets, and his mouth and throat burned with stale bile. He felt light as a sunbeam, and flushed and purged, and every line of every stick of furniture stood out sharply.

He tried to sit, and realized that he was strapped down to the cot. An IV drip, marked with the familiar *Salina,* hung beside him.

"Oy," he said.

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Instantly, Eric was at his side.

"Lewis? How you feeling, pal?"

"I'm all tied up," he said, stupidly. His lips were dry and cracked. "And I'm thirsty."

"Open your mouth, I want to take your temp."

Lewis obliged, and Eric slid the plastic eggshell-finish digital thermometer under his tongue. It chirped a second later. "You're back to normal, pal," Eric said, and started untying the restraints.

Lewis gingerly pulled himself up into a sitting position. "That was no good."

"You feeling okay? Feeling nauseous? You want me to get you a bucket?"

"Nauseated."

"What?"

"If I make you sick, I'm nauseous. If I'm sick, I'm nauseated. And I'm not, but I'm thirsty as hell."

Eric handed him a water bottle. He drank in careful, small sips, washing away the foul taste in his mouth.

"What the hell was *that?*"

"You had a fever. You were, uh, running at both ends. We shot you up with antispasmodics and analgesics, and knocked you out. You came to a couple of times, and pulled out your IV. That's why we tied you down."

"Where the hell did you get all that stuff? Who stuck me with a needle?"

"I keep a full medkit here, and I know how to use it. It's at least an hour to the hospital in Upala, if the road is passable, so I made sure we could cope with basic emergencies." He licked his lips. "You were out for two days, Lewis. You scared the hell out of me."

"Two days? Why didn't you get me to a hospital?"

Eric squirmed in his chair. "Look, if I'd taken you to Upala, you would've been pretty low-priority. People around here, lots of them get fevers like this, from malaria or dengue. The ER looks at them like nose-bleeds. I drew blood and FedExed it to a lab in Miami, and I've been emailing status reports to a doc there every hour."

Lewis swung his legs over the cot's edge and stood, shakily, grasping the drip-stand for support. The sheet slipped away, leaving him naked.

"Sit down, man. I'll get you some clothes."

"I need to use the shitter." Lewis was angry, though he didn't know who or what he was angry at. He just wanted to get out of this room and into the sun, to get some clothes on and pretend nothing had happened.

"Sit down, right, just sit. I'll get you some clothes."

Lewis sat, and Eric dashed out of the building. Lewis waited impatiently until he returned with a pair of Lewis's pants, much the worse for wear, torn and stained.

"Can you get this thing out of my arm?"

Eric cocked his head and looked like he was going to object, then took a sterile wipe out of a sealed packet on his desk and briskly withdrew the IV, blotting the pinprick of blood with the wipe. "Hold that while I get a Band-Aid."

Lewis struggled into the pants and stood. The pants slipped down his hips and he hitched them up again. Eric passed him a pair of beach sandals and he slid his feet into them, then walked unsteadily out to the latrines.

Eric busied himself with disposing of the sharp and the half-used drip,

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banging the point off the needle with a hammer before he dropped it into his wastebasket.

Lewis wasn't doing well. It was time for him to face up to it. He had made some friends in the group, and his hack on the CryptWare object had made them all a bundle, and the guy was positively giddy when he wasn't comatose, but . . .

Eric threw his hands up and left his office. The sun was already pounding down on the compound, punishingly hot and humid. Lewis stood by the latrines, talking animatedly with Michael, Mike, John, and Liz, the group's entire complement of Anglos. Eric tried to remember if he'd seen Lewis hanging out with any of the Ticos lately.

He wandered over and joined the conversation.

"That's great, a terrific idea, Liz," Lewis said, wildly animated, his long hair tangled around his head, his eyes as mad as a saint's. "Eric, you gotta hear this!"

"Liz has been going over the CryptWare libraries with a fine-tooth comb, ever since I found that backdoor. She's found tons more, just loads of holes and patches. The thing's held together with baling wire and spit."

Liz, a short redhead who had become one solid, crispy freckle since her arrival a year before, beamed with pride.

"So, what do you want to do about it? Write our own patches?"

Lewis rubbed his flat, brown stomach and grinned. "You're thinking too small, kiddo. We're going to write our own libraries! A whole class of secure objects, built from scratch, no hangovers from the dinosaur era, every line of it new! Think about it! The guys who cracked CryptWare release a competing product less than a year later. They'll be lining up to license it, man, we'll be bazillionaires!"

The whole group was beaming at him, nearly trembling with excitement. Lewis took a pull off his water bottle. Eric looked into their faces, then took Lewis's elbow. "Lew, can I speak with you in private?"

"What? Sure, of course. Be right back, guys."

Eric led Lewis off to the crick, then over the log-bridge to the other side and into the bush. They walked a few yards in, then emerged into a clearing. This was where they had felled the trees to get the lumber for the roof-joists, the locals helping him to mill the lumber with a chainsaw.

Eric sat on a stump in the cool shade. Lewis chose one in the sun. Eric took a deep breath, then another. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. Whatever it was, I got it all out of my system. I'm thinking, maybe it was the chicken we had for dinner?"

"I don't think so. I think that whatever you came down with in San José, it's getting worse. The lab in Miami is still looking over your blood, but I think it would be a good idea if we sent you off to Miami for a while, in case you have a relapse. I don't want you to . . ."

He trailed off, took another deep breath. "I want to make sure that you're safe."

Lewis rolled his eyes. "Look, I just had a bout of Montezuma's Revenge. I'm fine now; in fact, I've never felt better. Besides, if I go, the new project will fall apart."

"What new project?"

"The CryptWare thing! The one we're going to retire on? Remember? We're gonna bankrupt Lanny Shapiro, buddy, and we're gonna do it from the middle of the fuckin' *jungle*."

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"Look, I can't have half my crew off on some wild goose chase. We've got obligations, outstanding contracts, work to complete—"

"So you outsource it! That shit's *yesterday*; I'm talking about *tomorrow!* Look, I got guys back home who'd be glad to take the old stuff on. You wouldn't make anything on it, but we've got enough left over from my hack," he put the subtlest of spins on the word *my,* "to carry us. We need eight weeks to get a beta out the door, and another three months to finish it off. We'll rent out a casino in San José, call a press conference, fly a bunch of Silicon Alley cokeheads down for the weekend." His eyes glazed over, as though he were already seeing it happen.

Eric shook his head unconsciously. "This is my shop, Lewis. If I say you need to go to Miami, you go to Miami. If you want to start a new project, you bring it to *me,* and I decide." He took another deep breath. "I'm in charge here."

"Fine. You're the boss. If you don't want to make money, that's your biz. You want to kick me out after I make you *millions,* that's your biz too. Just don't imagine for *one second* that I won't go home with this idea, hire away whoever I need, and do it myself. What do you think this is, *Apocalypse Now?* You going power-crazy here in the jungle, kid?"

"Lewis—"

"Forget it. I'll go pack."

They walked back to camp in silence, Lewis a few paces ahead of him, slapping absently at the mosquitoes that landed on his bare chest and shoulders.

They got back to find Cesar, Tomás, Fede, Felipe, and Patricia digging beside the latrines with pickaxes and shovels.

"*¿Que pasa?*" Eric asked them.

"We're digging a new latrine for your friend," Patricia said in angry Spanish. "If he's going to stay here to work on this new project, we don't want to get infected."

"Who said he was staying?" Eric answered, also in Spanish.

"Michael. He and the rest are in the office, planning their big project. It's not right. If there's a new project you should tell us all."

"There isn't any new project."

Patricia wiped the sweat from her face. "You'd better tell your friend that, then."

Eric forced himself to walk slowly to the workspace, and found the Anglos in a huddle, their computers all pushed together at one end of the room, mousing around in a groupware space.

"What's going on, guys?"

"We're working on a timeline for the project," Liz said, barely looking up from her monitor.

"Who told you to do that?"

The whole group stopped and swiveled on their chairs to look at him. "No one," Michael said carefully. "We've never waited to be told before. Is that changing now?"

Eric felt panic clutch at his chest. He felt like he was ten years old.

"No, it's not fucking changing, all right? Everything's just the same as it always was!"

Without waiting for a reply, he stormed out, slamming the door behind him. He found Lewis in the dorm, packing his bag.

"Cut that shit out. You're staying. I'm going. I'm gonna visit Jorge and chill out for a while."

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Lewis sat on the bed. He was very pale, and his hands were trembling. "What's this all about, kiddo?" he asked, softly.

"The guys, they're on your side. They want to make this project. I'm not going to get into some kind of dominance struggle with you, right? I'm going to go chill for a while—it's been very high-stress for me lately. You go ahead and do what you want to."

Lewis closed his eyes and sagged. "I don't want to fuck you around, buddy. But this is a *good* idea, the best I've heard in a long time. Put you on the map. I wish you'd stay and help out. We need you around here."

"I've earned some vacation time, and I'm taking it. I hope you're right, but if you're not, we can cover some losses. We're flush."

The Tico codemonkeys stopped speaking English the day after Eric left. When the morning's planning session was done, Lewis got a shovel out of the toolshed and wandered over to the new latrine. The Ticos had already dug three meters, and Patricia was down the hole, shoveling the red, clay soil into a bucket that Fede was hauling out and dumping into a wheelbarrow.

Lewis smiled at Fede, and Fede pointedly did not acknowledge it. He shrugged and peered down the hole at Patricia.

"Hey, can I get a turn at that?" he called down.

Patricia looked up, her face flushed and sweaty, her hair in disarray. Wordlessly, she drove her shovel into the soil and climbed out, using rough handholds cut into the walls.

Lewis tried a grin out on her, but she just stalked off toward the well. Shaking his head, he cautiously climbed into the pit.

Down inside, it was dark and cool and cozy. He took up the smooth handle of the shovel and drove it into the earth beneath him, tamping it down with the sole of his loafer. He levered a wedge of earth out, and dumped it into the bucket, then repeated the process. "Hey, Fede, it's full! Haul away!"

There was no answer from the top. "Fede?" he said again, but he knew that Fede had gone. He climbed out of the hole—much harder than climbing in—and walked back to the work-building.

"Michael, how'd you like to help me out with the new latrine?" he said.

"Yeah, all right," Michael said, and put his computer into sleep mode.

Lunch was late, and eaten in a strained silence. It was Cesar and Tomás's turn to cook, and they'd prepared some kind of super-spicy bean dish, served with rice and fried plantain. Lewis gave up on the beans after a few forksful, and ate the flavorless rice instead.

After a decent interval, he scraped his plate into the compost bucket, refilled his water bottle from the filter, and went back to the work-building to sketch out the architecture for the new library. Fede and Felipe were already at work, speaking in rapid Spanish to each other while they typed. Lewis took a glance at their monitors and saw that they were running routine maintenance on the existing sites. He sat down at his laptop and sent his notes from the morning's meeting to the printer and then sat back in his chair with the hardcopy and a pencil, scribbling notes in the margins.

Some time later, he realized that the rest of the codemonkeys had arrived. His team—hell, call a spade a spade and say the Anglos—were sitting around him at their workstations, silently tapping at their keyboards. The Ticos sat at the other end of the room, working on their own projects. *This can't be good,* he thought, and wished that Eric was there.

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Lewis tried to spread a little camaraderie by taking everyone out for drinks at the cantina that night, but when they arrived, the Ticos had stuck to one corner, and Anglos clustered around him at the bar. Everyone woke up with a hangover the next morning, Lewis included, and the silence was more strained than ever.

Lewis threw himself into his work, buried himself deep, coming up for a single meal each day, often eaten in front of his keyboard. The team made good progress. Liz was building the core microcode, and Michael and the rest were filling in the rough spots with function hooks and other niceties. Lewis took everything they produced and attacked it from every angle he could imagine, often sending them back to the drawing board with nothing more than a printed-out login session in which he'd hacked their code, the important items circled in ink and annotated in a scrawled, illegible hand.

The Ticos, in their corner, went about the daily business of the company, and spoke only in Spanish. Lewis learned to tune them out entirely.

He hardly noticed that a week had gone by, and then, one evening, Eric wandered into the workspace.

Lewis was the last one left that night, pounding away under the fluorescents, the remains of his dinner balanced on a ream of printout.

"Lew?" Eric said, touching his shoulder.

"Huh? Oh, hey kiddo. Back so soon? How you doin'?" Lewis marked his place in his notes with one finger and spun around in his chair.

"I'm fine. Jorge says hi."

Lewis strongly doubted that.

"Anyway," Eric continued, "the guys have been telling me about the work. Seems like you're making a lot of progress."

"Oh yeah," Lewis said absently. "We're way ahead of schedule. Another three weeks, we'll have a beta we can release."

"You're sure you're not pushing it a little? All work and no play, right?"

"You know me. Once I get my teeth into something, I can't let go until I've finished it."

Eric smiled, and Lewis managed to smile back, before a new line of attack flashed before his eyes and his fingers flew back to the keyboard.

The next time he looked up, Eric was gone.

Eric patrolled the perimeter the next morning, trying to make a meditation of it, soaking up the solitude and the view that stretched to the distant mountains. Jorge's place had teemed with relatives and in-laws and hangers-on, and no matter when he rose, there was always someone up before him—a maid making breakfast in the kitchen, a young mother changing her infant on the terrace, a guard smoking cigarettes and reading a comic book.

In the workspace, the computers rang in 0600 and the roosters began their calls. Eric drew a bucket of water up from the well and splashed some on his face and put the rest on the stove for coffee. He'd decided that this was his rota for cooking duty, and he'd brought sausages, bread, and a fresh bucket of pricey peanut-butter back with him, so all he had to do was boil some eggs.

Once everything was perking nicely, he settled down on one of the dining-room benches to consider the ruins of his pocket Utopia.

Patricia had barely been civil to him when he returned. He cornered her later as she played cards with the Ticos while the Anglos argued about the architecture of the new library, building models from leftover lumber and

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wire in the toolshed. He asked her if she could spare a moment, and she'd stormed off with him. They sat in his office, their conversation made private by the racket of the air-conditioner.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Nothing," she snapped back in Spanish.

"Why don't I believe you?" Eric answered, in Spanish as well.

Patricia pursed her lips, folded her arms across her chest, and glared over his head.

"Come on, since when can't you talk to me? What's wrong, Patricia?"

"What do you think?" she said fiercely.

"Well, it looks to me like you and some of the others are pretty angry. Is it Lewis?"

"He's the symptom, Eric."

"So what's the cause?"

Patricia switched her glare to him.

"Me? What did I do?"

"You let that pig walk all over you. You let him start this stupid project, gave it to *them,* and stuck *us* with the shit-work! Then you *conveniently* took a vacation!"

"Patricia, I didn't stick anyone with anything. The project wasn't Lewis's idea, it was Liz's. And since when is there a *them* and an *us* around here? This is a team."

"Well, it's pretty clear who the first string is, Eric. And who sits on the bench. We're sick of it. If you want a bunch of secretaries, hire some. We're here to develop new projects, too, you know."

Eric took a deep breath, and another one. "Patricia, you're doing exactly what we do whenever we're in a holding pattern. If you want to do something glamorous, suggest something. In the meantime, I'm back again, so I'll be helping out on the maintenance. No one expects you to be a secretary."

She slumped. "Eric, we like you and we like working for you. You're a good guy. This is a wonderful place you've built. Don't let him wreck it, okay?" Impulsively, she leaned forward and gave him a hug and a quick, sisterly kiss on the cheek.

She'd left then, and Eric had put aside the project report Liz had given him and worked on the maintenance stuff until everyone else was in bed.

The water boiled, and he spooned coffee into the "sock" that the Ticos used to brew it in, positioned a thermos bottle underneath and brewed away, making it extra strong.

He was pouring himself a cup when Lewis emerged from the dorm, shirtless, wearing a cut-off pair of pants and flip-flops. He disappeared into his latrine for a moment, then joined Eric.

"Morning. Coffee," he said.

Eric poured him a cup.

"I am getting too old for this, buddy," he said, after he'd had a few sips.

"I know what you mean. Don't try to keep up with the kids, right. You'll kill yourself."

"I'm having a hard time keeping up with *me,* fuck keeping up with them. The whole object class is coming together fast—it's like it wants to be built or something. Haven't had a single major snag. You hire good people."

"I do," Eric said, staring into the hills. "All of the people here are very good at what they do."

* * *

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Lewis released the beta to a hand-picked group of testers and developers two weeks ahead of schedule. He knew he'd been pushing himself too hard. He was pretty sure he'd been running a low-grade fever for the last couple of days, and he'd commandeered a bottle of aspirin that he kept in his pocket all the time.

He'd shaved for the first time in weeks that morning. His reflection was gaunt and his eyes were set in deep black circles. The people on his team were equally worn. Liz's freckles were fading back into her skin, and Michael's tan was nearly gone.

He stumbled into Eric's office after the release. "Beta's out."

Eric, buried in the routine work he'd taken on since his return, looked up and smiled. "Good."

His team took a Frisbee out to the big clearing and pitched it around. They waved at him as he trudged back into the workspace. He nodded back wearily.

The Ticos had grown increasingly secretive since Eric's return. They were working on something, but they always switched to screen-saver mode when he tried to shoulder-surf. They ignored him as he closed up his laptop and tidied his notes. He checked his email, though it was far too early to be hearing back from any of the testing group.

Then he went back to his bunk and slept and slept and slept.

"You're going to Miami," Eric said, the way he'd been practicing while Lewis slept.

Lewis, seated across from his desk, listless and haggard, gave no sign that he'd heard.

"I'll take you to San José today, we'll stay with Jorge, and we'll fly out tomorrow. They're expecting you at the Martinez Clinic."

Lewis ran a hand through his hair.

"Lewis, wake up, buddy. Did you hear me?"

"I heard, I heard. Let's go."

Eric had been expecting a struggle. He'd left Lewis alone until he finished the beta, because he knew that he'd have to knock him out and drag him to get him to leave otherwise. Still, he didn't think it would be *this* easy.

Not wanting to push his luck, he stood and then helped Lewis to his feet, and walked him out to the Jeep.

Driving through Miami in a rental car gave Eric the creeps. Too many white faces, too many billboards, the roads too smooth and the traffic too orderly. It had been years since he'd come north, and now that he was here, he wished he was back home in the jungle.

Lewis was stretched out in the back seat, oblivious. Eric watched the rental's heads-up display as it guided him through the streets to the Martinez Clinic, where, Jorge assured him, they were as discreet as they were expert in treating tropical diseases.

After Eric had checked Lewis in, he left his cellular number with the nurse at the desk and went out to find some breakfast.

The hospital room was fine. The nurses were pleasant, and the doctors professional and kind. The bedside video had limited net access, as well as unlimited international programming feeds and pay-per-view. Lewis hated it.

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He was fine, dammit. He'd overworked himself a little, and needed some downtime. A couple of days hanging around a bar and sleeping late. A couple of days, and he'd been here for a week.

"Kiddo," he said, when Eric dropped in for his daily visit, "I can't stay here any more. These guys have taken samples of everything, and they keep coming back negative. I'm *fine*. It's time for me to get back to work. It's time for *you* to get back to work, too."

"I'm working, don't worry about me, right. I'm downloading everything to my hotel room and doing it from there. The doc says you have to stay here for a few more days at least, for observation. You can't be 'fine,' Lew: you've lost thirty kilos in eight weeks, and you've still got the runs." Eric was maddeningly calm. Lewis felt like strangling him.

"You can't keep me here," he said, hearing the hysterical edge in his voice. "I could just walk out."

Eric rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. "Don't do that, okay?"

"Why the hell not? The project needs me! I'm not sick!"

"The project is coming along just fine. If you want, I'll forward the status reports to you as they come in."

"Don't try to cut me out of this thing, kid. This is my baby. I have the right to see it through."

"No one's trying to cut you out of anything. You're being paranoid. Give it another week here, and if everything is okay, we'll go back. I promise."

Another week? Jesus, he'd go nuts. "I don't think I can wait that long."

There was a long silence. "What if I see about getting permission for you to come out with me? We'll go to the flicks, check out some shops, okay?"

Lewis saw the strain on Eric's face, and felt ashamed. "Okay, okay. A week. Okay, I can do that."

There was something very wrong with Lewis. The doc knew it, even if he couldn't say just what it was. Some new parasite, masquerading as something innocuous, that was his best guess. As the week drew to a close and Lewis insisted on being taken to L.L. Bean and Banana Republic to buy tropical clothes to take home with him, Eric's sense of dread and impending doom overshadowed every moment.

Finally, as they turned into the driveway of his hotel so that Lewis could pick up hardcopy of the day's status reports from home, Eric knew he would have to confront him.

"The doc, he's not happy."

Lewis went rigid. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He doesn't know what you've got, but he knows you've got *some*thing. He doesn't think you should go back to the camp—you're contagious, and you'd be too far from the hospital."

"Well, fuck that! I'm *fine*, right as rain, and I'm going back."

"No, you're not, Lewis. I'm not going to be responsible if you spread this thing. Christ, suppose it turns out to be worse than AIDS? I'm not going to be responsible for your death, either. You can stay here in Miami and telecommute—I'll keep you on the payroll—or you can walk away, but you're not setting foot in the camp until you have a clean bill of health."

"Why, you little backstabber! What's the matter, Eric? You worried that I'll take over? What does my team think of this, Eric? Were you planning to keep all of my notes and my laptop there?"

Eric flinched, and felt his guts curdle. "Your clothes and your computer are

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up in my room. I brought them with me, just in case. And you may not believe it, but I'm doing this because I care about your health, right?"

"Bull*shit,* Eric. Look, if you want me to go, have the fucking balls to say so—don't try to weasel out of it by talking about the *doctor* or my *health.*"

"I *don't* want you to go," Eric said, and realized that it was a lie as he said it. "And this *is* about your health."

"Get me my shit," Lewis snarled, jumping out of the car. "I'll be in the bar."

Eric's first clue that something was amiss was when he tried to call home from the departure lounge. He was nervous, hands slick with sweat as he watched for Lewis. He hadn't heard from him since he'd stalked out of the hotel and into a cab, and he had a terrible premonition that he'd try to come back to camp, and they'd end up seated next to each other on the Air Lacsa flight to San José.

The phone rang and rang and rang. He didn't notice at first, but eventually it dawned on him that it had rung twenty times. He was about to hang up and redial when Michael's Aussie twang came down the line: "Yeh?"

"Michael?"

"Eric, fuck, it's about time you rang. This place is a madhouse."

"Why? What's wrong?" Irrational panic washed over him.

"The fucking Ticos've all gone. They quit this morning."

"Quit? What do you mean quit?"

"Walked away. Took off. Went home. They wiped their machines, trashed the backups and left. They left their resignations on your desk. Want me to read them?" He sounded hysterical.

"Why didn't you call me? Jesus, Michael, can't I leave for a couple of days without everything falling to shit there?"

"Look, chum, *I'm* not the one who left, all right? You've got no call going spare at *me.* Yell at the fucking spics, you want to yell at someone!"

The racial epithet shocked him. Sweat coursed down his back. "Michael, I'll be there tonight, right. Just sit tight till I get there. If Patricia and the others come back, tell them to call me." The intercom chimed, and the ground steward called final boarding for his flight. "I've got to go, right, the plane's taking off. Just *sit tight.*"

Lanny Shapiro had taken his call immediately. He'd been very interested in Lewis's story: cracking his objects from the jungle, the group of high-octane codemonkeys who worked with him, the fact that Lewis was willing to take the thing he'd found in the jungle and work on it at HQ in Dallas, for CryptWare.

Lewis booked the flight to Dallas from the bathroom of his airport hotel room, using the phone hung next to the toilet. His bowels spasmed and his body was greasy with fever-sweat, but he hadn't puked since checking out of the hospital.

Once the spasm had passed, he took his laptop down off the countertop next to the sink, opened it out across his naked thighs, and fired off email to Michael, Mike, Liz, and John. Lanny had wanted to send those letters himself, but Lewis convinced him that he knew exactly how to phrase the offer to join him in Dallas.

He finished the emails, then leaned forward and grabbed the waste-basket, snagging it just in time, so that only a little vomit ended up on the shiny bathroom tile floor. ❍

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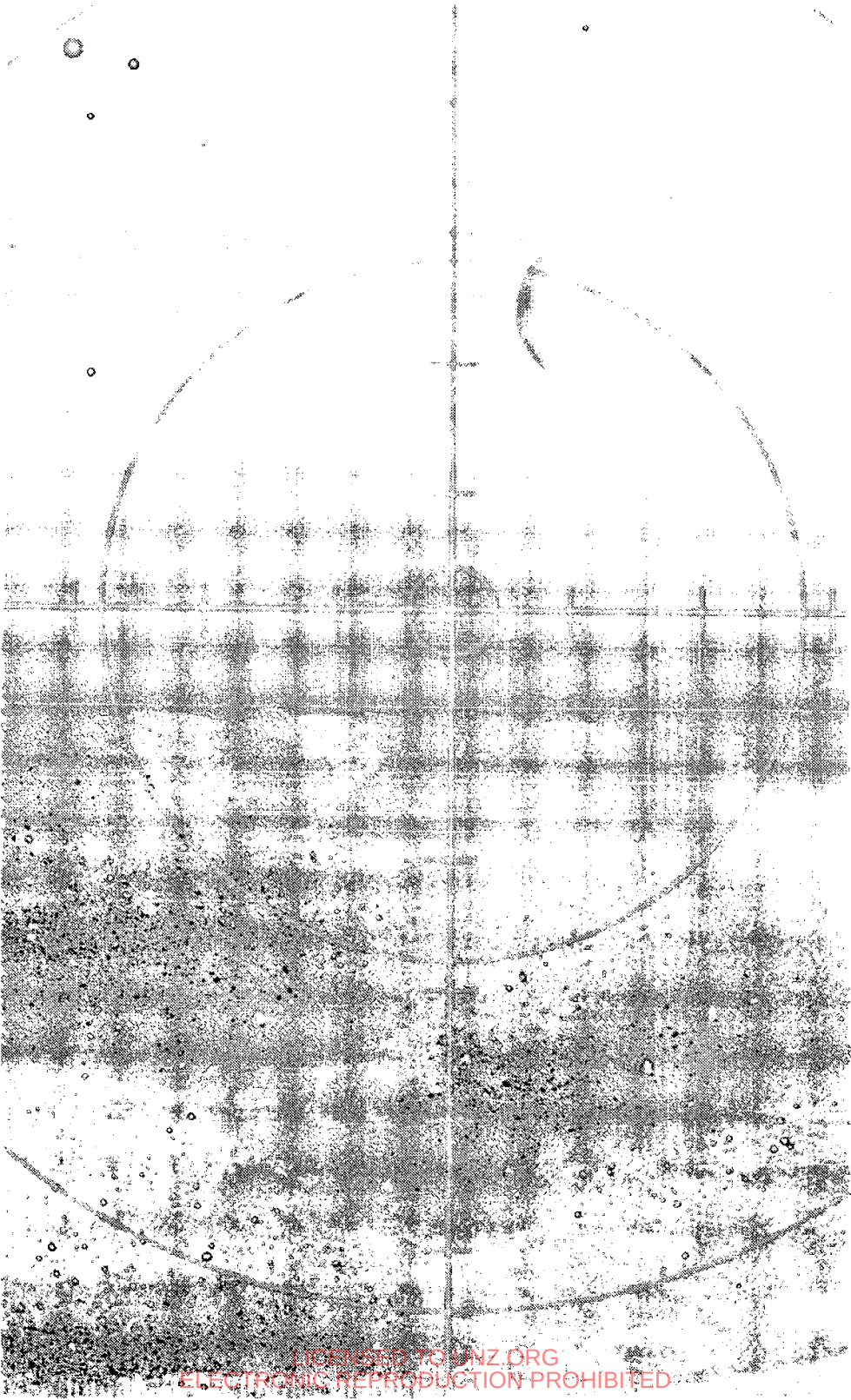
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Joe Haldeman

ODD COUPLING

Joe Haldeman's latest novel, *Forever Peace* (Ace), has just won the John W. Campbell award, and is currently a finalist for the Hugo. His new collection of short stories, *None So Blind*, was recently published by Avon in paperback. The book's Hugo-award-winning title story originally appeared in our November 1994 issue. Mr. Haldeman is currently working on a sequel to his classic novel, *The Forever War*.

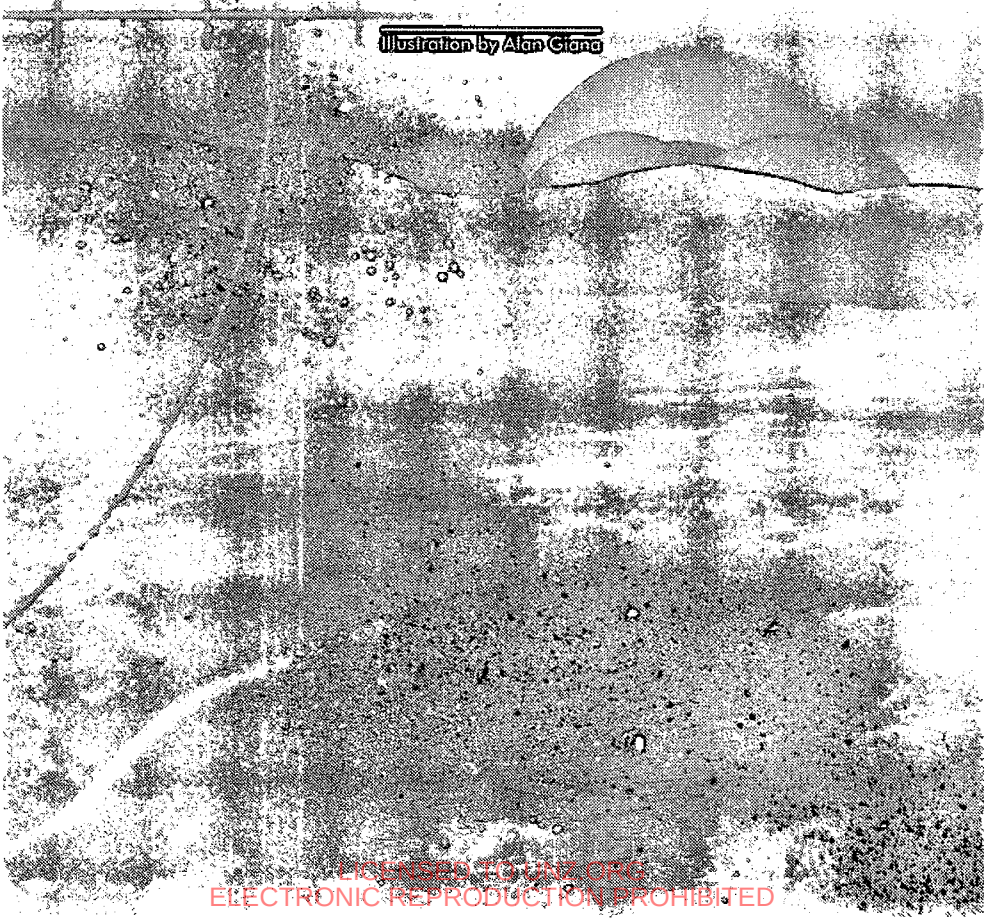

Illustration by Alan Gianna

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The wind never stopped. It changed direction, sometimes disastrously, and the hurricane speed quieted to a gale sometimes, but it never stopped. The inside rooms of the base, the common room and the private quarters, were supposedly well enough insulated that you couldn't hear it. But you heard it in your mind when you couldn't hear it in your ears, a silent scream of white noise that contained melodies, sometimes voices.

Nathan Perlman sat down at his monitor and reached up to take the safety helmet off its peg. He had never used it except as a calendar. He crossed off the 289 and carefully inscribed a 288 at the end of a long snailing spiral of numbers. He had 288 Windy days left, which was about 320 Earth days.

His coworker, Sobar Chan, eased into the chair next to him. "And how are you this fine day, Nat?"

"Fucking bats. I'm going fucking bats."

"You're what-ing? Where could you find one?"

Nat laughed. "It's something my great-grandfather used to say, before he died. 'I'm going fucking bats.' We had this picture of him going out with a net, and, you know."

"He was senile, then?"

"Well, he was crazy, going crazy, was what he meant." A gust blew a sudden rattle of pebbles against the window and they both jumped. "Me, too. I've got 288 days to go. I'll be fucking bats a long time before that."

"It's an unpleasant image, Nat. They're too small." Chan turned on the flatscreen.

"Not in Iowa." Nat turned his on, too. "Big enough to carry off children, small cattle."

"Oh yeah, we used to have those on Syrtis Major." Chan turned the console's joystick in a slow circle. "Extinct. We fucked them all to death."

"There's hope, then." He did the same with his joystick. "Got anything?"

"Huh uh. Scope won't traverse from about 270 over to twelve, fifteen. Wind must've been steady last night, piled up some crap there."

"I'm clear all around." He typed in a simple command. "We're only twenty klicks apart. I should have about the same wind conditions. Let me see." He craned over to look at Chan's console. Chan commanded the scope to swing back and forth. It showed an almost featureless landscape: low rock outcroppings with primitive vegetation hanging on, swirling dust, smooth pebbles shifting in the wind. It looked the same as Nat's, except it couldn't make a full circle.

"I'll just walk it a few steps in the 90, 100 direction," Chan said. The scopes were attached to reconnaissance crawlers, like small low tanks with eight articulated legs. Chan punched the WALK button and held the joystick at 100 degrees and pushed down on a pedal. Nothing happened.

"Stuck," Chan said.

"Shit," Nat said.

"You poor hard workers didn't have any breakfast," Barbara said. She had come up behind them, voluptuous, blonde, wearing only a wisp of nightgown. Neither of them looked at her. "Can I bring something out?"

Nat wanted a peanut butter-and-pickle sandwich and Chan ordered a bowl of grits with cheese. She turned to go. "Be Harry, okay?" Nat said. "Less distracting."

Barbara was the morph's default mode. It turned into a burly short black man as it walked. "If that's what you want, Nat," it said in a deep, scratchy voice. "All day, all night."

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"Barbara's fine at night," he said. To Chan: "Back it up?"

"Trying." Chan had the joystick at 280 and was pumping the pedal. A speaker keened wind shrieking, sand and pebbles scratching and rattling. There was also a faint regular r-r-r, r-r-r, r-r-r sound of the spidery legs trying to make progress. "Maybe it got pinned under something."

"I'll come take a look. God, I hope this doesn't mean we have to go outside." On the large screen between them they called up a crude topographical map and plotted a tentative course for Nat's machine. Harry brought the sandwich and bowl of grits.

"Looks good," Chan said.

"Yours, too." They rarely made comments any more about each other's taste in food, drink, and morph setting. Live and let live.

Nat and Chan were employed by Hartford Interplanetario as "Mining Supervisor, Pioneer" on Windy, the second planet out from BS994387, a red dwarf that was a tachyon nexus, but otherwise had nothing to recommend it. There were similar teams on the other three planets, looking for something that might be cheaply exploited, so that Hartford could take advantage of the low shipping costs. Almost nothing was valuable enough to be mined if it meant shipping the stuff slow freight to another system. But if the system had a tachyon nexus, you could turn a profit on almost anything that wasn't common in the dirt of every world.

So far, all they'd found was dirt. Really exciting stuff like aluminum, silicon, magnesium, iron. That confirmed what the orbital survey had said: a nothing planet. But no planet was off the hook until actual human beings had been down there with actual robots for a couple of years. Because something small and really valuable was worth a lot more than something large and slightly valuable.

Nat and Chan continued their quest through the music library for something they both liked. They weren't allowed to use the visual library while they worked, but there were tens of thousands of musical pieces to drown out the inaudible sound of the wind. Nat didn't like much written after 1800 and Chan didn't like much written before 2100, so they usually wound up giving each other an hour at a time. Chan could stand an hour of Mozart, and Nat an hour of Martian cacophony, rather than listen to the wind.

So it was an hour of "Cantata for Violincello in B-flat minor" followed by an hour of "Azt guurny guurny," while Nat's surveyor spidered toward Chan's at a slow walk. (All the Atz pieces belonged to the venerable Martian "postmortem" tradition; music created by the last impulses of the composer's brain, after legal death.)

Nat controlled the machine's progress with joystick and pedals while Chan mostly napped, occasionally opening one eye and commenting, when the sounds indicated that Nat had gotten into difficulty. It was mainly a matter of avoiding crevasses and being prepared for crosswinds. When the machine came out of the lee of a boulder, it would be hit by a sudden sandblast that could flip it over like a helpless turtle if you weren't careful. It wasn't actually helpless, though; it could rock back and forth and flip back over, but that wasted time.

"Wake up, Chan. Almost there."

Chan sat up and looked at the screen. "What angle?"

"Southwest. Call it 230."

"Hmm . . . got you. Coming over the rise there." The crawlers were conspicuous, bright orange against the drab landscape.

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Nat glanced over. "Need a new coat of paint. So where the hell are you on mine?" They both stared. "There," Nat said, "over by the left edge. You're under something, all right." Only the front third of the machine was visible, an orange crescent.

There was a sudden swirl of dust and Nat's screen went blank. They looked at each other. That had never happened before. Cloudy, yes, but not blank.

"Replay," Chan said to the screen. "Show me the last thirty seconds." It showed Nat's crawler beetling its way over the rise, and then there was a blinding cloud of dust, not in itself unusual—and then the machine was gone.

"Covered up?" Chan said. "Fall in a crevasse?"

Nat was working the pedals and joystick. "I don't think so. Almost no resistance."

Chan pointed up at the topo map, with the two orange spots that corresponded to the crawlers. "You've gone 250, 300 meters since you lost the picture."

"Shit. Maybe something snapped off the periscope and the thing's just tumbling . . . no." He shook his head. "That wouldn't stop the emergency anchors from working."

"Look at the windspeed."

"Zero. So that's broken, too." He punched SOUND 2 and there was a muffled rumbling that slowed and stopped. He looked at the topo map. "Look to you like it's stopped?"

"Yeah, maybe 700, 800 meters. Still don't see it, though."

"Maybe it's in a low spot. Try the periscope." Chan cranked it up, the picture on the screen vibrating in the wind and then wildly oscillating.

"Hmm. It's disappeared." The picture steadied every few seconds, and there was no sign of the orange machine.

"Sure. Just like that."

"We'd be able to see it," Chan said with regret. "Guess we have to call Julie."

"You know what she'll say."

"Maybe we'll catch her in a good mood."

Julie was their supervisor, stationed with twenty others on Blazes, the cinder of a planet closest to the tachyon nexus. Having lots of company didn't give her a cheerful disposition. She said no, they couldn't have another robot surveyor. One of them would have to suit up and go check it out. Wasn't there any alternative? Sure, she said. They could *both* suit up and go out.

Chan reached in a drawer and pulled out a deck of cards. "High card goes?"

"That's too quick. Deal out five-card draw." Chan got two kings to Nat's pair of deuces. "Best two out of three?"

Harry had watched the whole thing with interest. "Why not send me? I can operate the suit."

"You know the regulations, Harry," Nat said. "Human judgment."

"My judgment is adequate to the situation. And neither of you has been greatly constrained by regulations in the past. I am expendable."

"Not really," Chan said.

"No. Without Barbara and Lisa and what's-her-name, Fido?"

"Fiona."

"Without them we'd both go fucking bats."

Harry frowned. "If you describe a bat to me, I will attempt to simulate one."

The "suit" was not something you actually wore, like a general-purpose

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spacesuit. If you tried to step outside the airlock in a spacesuit, you would be blown across the landscape for hundreds of kilometers—however long it took for the landscape to break you up into disgusting little chunks. So the suits were more like treaded heavy vehicles, except that you did wear them like clothing—just a ten-ton outfit you slipped on for a stroll. On all fours.

They hadn't been engineered for Windy, of course. Hartford didn't waste capital customizing equipment for every low-probability planet. They were standard issue for high-pressure, high-temperature surfaces. On this part of Windy, the temperature and pressure of the air were only a little higher than on a Terran equatorial desert. The air just moved real fast.

Wearing nothing but a high-tech diaper, Nat told the suit to open. The inside was a glossy pink satin with a neutral machine smell. Nat stepped into it, his feet slipping into the proper waldo orifices, and he leaned forward onto his elbows. "Close." The top slid shut over him with a heavy permanent sound.

He'd had ten hours' training on Earth. It seemed like a long time ago.

He slid forward so his chin was comfortable on the soft rest. The two large monitors he stared down at were blank, though the orange dials surrounding them were active, their dozens of bits of information revealing that he was safe inside the airlock, for the time being. He slid his hands inside the waldo sleeves and pinched finger instructions for the two screens. One lit up with the inside of the airlock, forward, and the other revealed Chan at the crawler command station. Chan was calm, alert. Fiona stood a respectful distance in the background.

Nat had seen Fiona in the morph catalog and shuddered. A big and powerful woman, slope-shouldered, pendulous, swarthy; she towered over Chan and weighed twice as much. What could any normal person, even from Mars, see in her? A mother figure, Nat supposed, though his own mother didn't look like that. All of his aunts did.

Now Barbara, on the other hand, Barbara . . . a part of the diaper tightened to remind him not to think about Barbara.

"Begin cycling," he said to Chan and the airlock. A pump thrummed, sucking Earth air and human germs out of the room. Then the room baked itself and strobed with hard ultraviolet. Hartford was very careful about contamination. It wouldn't do to wipe out a potentially profitable life form.

The airlock door slid open and a fusillade of pebbles blew in to ricochet harmlessly against the bulletproof walls. A few spanged against the suit, and Nat tried to ignore them. Plenty more where they came from.

"Take your time," Chan said. "Be careful."

"Always good advice," he murmured. He dropped his hands down in the satin darkness to the two hard handles that were the simple tread controls, left and right. With both of them fully forward, the machine moved at a fast walk. Pull back slightly on one to make it turn in that direction; the full-forward/full back combination would make it spin slowly on its axis, grinding a hole in the dirt. That could be handy if Nat wanted to spend the night out. He thought he would not.

He leaned forward and the treads clanked to life, slipping a little on the smooth metal floor, and moved him toward the light and swirl outside. The machine lurched as it climbed the pile of gravel that had accumulated outside the airlock door and then nosed down onto the hardpan dirt.

Nat looked around, rotating his wide-field viewer 360 degrees. Behind him, the base was a squat shiny white dome in the middle of a nest of smaller domes. They had a pleasing irregular shimmering texture, like beaten metal,

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from the accumulation of millions of impacts. The manufacturer guaranteed their structural integrity for twenty-four months. He wondered how often they'd had to shell out for mistakes.

With his chin, Nat adjusted the noise level down to that of a mildly enthusiastic drum solo. The landscape in front of him was gray on gray, hills and rocks and sky. The low hills were almost as smooth as the domes, except where harder rock excrescences poked out in fantastic shapes, sculpted into sweeping curves and knife edges by the sandblast weather.

"Topo screen," Nat said, and a small side screen showed a relief map of the area between him and the lost probes. He groped for a stylus and tapped it a couple of times to establish where the point fell on the picture. Then he drew a careful curving route that stuck to low ground. "Project that." On the wide-angle view of the landscape, there now was a red line the width of the suit that straight-edged out for about a hundred meters and then hooked around a low hillock. He pushed the tread controls forward and followed it.

"I've got your route here," Chan said. "Looks good. Anything I can do?"

"Pipe me some music. None of that Martian crap."

"Philistine. Bach?"

"Any old Bach." He got the second Brandenburg concerto, with the reeds and brass doing their entertwining erotic themes, and tried not to think of Barbara.

The sudden crash of a large rock striking amidships startled him, and the suit wobbled off the line on both sides twice before he got it back under control. Maybe he ought to ask the thing to follow the line automatically. No, it was better to stay in the loop. The suit's brain was faster and unburdened by functions other than logic and memory, but who knows what might happen. Maybe some situation that called for human talents, like confusion and panic.

It was interesting to see the world close-up like this. The adrenaline edge. The pictures were no different from those transmitted by the probes, actually, but there was a sort of sensory feedback in the crunch of the treads and the way the suit rocked when a blast of wind hit it. Even the sterile smell, or lack of odor, of the suit added an element of strangeness. In the base there was always the olfactory echo of the last meal or snack, and the slight smell of Chan and whoever the morph was. It certainly had different smells for Harry and for Barbara . . . stop thinking about Barbara!

It occurred to Nat for the thousandth time that there was something a little sinister about his enthusiasm for the Barbara incarnation, as there was to Chan's Fiona. The Confederación wanted to keep them under control, after all, and what better way than associating the Ideal Mate with the job? He never followed that line of thought too long, though, and had never discussed it with Chan. If the spell were broken he'd still have 288 days to go.

The suit had about four times the top speed of the crawlers, so even going cautiously, it took Nat less than an hour to cover the distance.

"Chan? I don't see a damned thing out of the ordinary."

Blue arrows appeared on the ground, going in two directions. "Mine ought to be about three hundred meters to the right there. Yours is a little less than a kilometer ahead and to the left."

"Okay. I'll check yours first."

"Watch yourself."

"Not possible, actually." He zeroed the odometer and followed the arrows slowly. "I'll be careful, though."

His heartbeat was almost as loud as the rattle outside. He paused for a minute to suck on the pure-oxygen nipple, and moved on.

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"Okay, I've gone 290 meters. Not a damned thing." The landscape was particularly bland here, a gray blanket.

The gray blanket lifted itself up and flopped over on top of Nat. Everything went black. "Chan! Chan!" No answer. He chinned the screen control and said, "Play back the past twenty seconds in ten-to-one slow motion."

Studying the ground, he could see a slight, almost imperceptible, difference in color and texture between the dirt and the thing that was now lying on top of him. There was the hint of an edge here and there; it seemed to be roughly circular and about ten meters in diameter.

How could it just lie there like a throw rug and not be blown over the horizon? Even as the question was forming, he saw the answer. Tendrils as thin and transparent as fishing line snapped in from a dozen or so anchoring rocks on the other side of the thing. The wind *did* pick it up then, and flip it over on top of him. For a split second Nat saw his orange crawler, lying on its side on the ground. The filaments spun out over his position, evidently seeking new anchors, and the rug thing settled snugly over him.

He called for Chan a few more times but didn't expect an answer, and none came. Well, he wasn't totally powerless. He turned on the suit's outside light so he could study the underside of the thing. If it were alive it would have to have some vulnerable spot like a head. Even an amoeba had a nucleus.

"Nothing," he said to nobody. The thing had no surface detail at all. Of course this was the same side he had seen, or not seen, as he approached.

The suit didn't have any weapons, but it did have a hot pinpoint laser for field spectroscopy. Nat took his arm out of the tractor waldo sleeve and found the instrument waldo sleeve. He turned out the light and pointed the laser straight up and pulled the trigger.

There was a red spot and then a nice little hole, maybe two millimeters wide. The dim grey sky showed through, and then a radio whisper: ". . . if you can hear—" Chan said. Then the hole closed. Nat fired the laser again, but this time the hole closed in a fraction of a second. He held his aim steady and burned in a tight circle. As the beam moved, the circle closed up behind it.

Maybe he could just bull his way out. Grind the thing up in his tank treads. He grasped the tractor controls again and pushed forward.

The suit slipped forward as if it were on grease, and then it stopped. The treads kept going around, but there was no forward motion. He backed up, with the same lack of result. "Shit." Nat realized that he was now completely surrounded by the thing; it had slipped under him and over him. "*Shit!*"

It started to rock. Nat repeated the word, louder.

Chan couldn't hear him, but his dire straits were obvious. The combination of Nat's cameras and those of the crawler outside, suddenly functional, had given the base a clear picture of what was happening. Nat was tied up in a bundle, trapped by something that looked like a sentient rug.

"Fiona," Chan said, "check and see whether he took the sampling module."

The morph was gone for about a minute. "No. It's in the corner."

Chan stood up. "No reason for him to think of it, I guess."

"You're not going out, are you?"

"Of course I am. He's helpless." On the monitor, the bundle lurched and tipped over. "My God."

"Please send me instead. I could never live with myself if I, if something happened to—"

"Fiona! You're a machine. An organic machine programmed to care for Nat and me."

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"I know that. Do you think my love isn't real?"

Chan patted the back of the chair. "You sit here. Show your love for us by obeying my orders one hundred percent." The morph sat down and they kissed. "I'll be careful."

"Nat was careful."

"I'll be *armed* and careful."

Fiona watched Chan go. "Armed with mining tools," she muttered, as if programmed to talk to herself. "I could do a lot better."

The morph did obediently stay in the chair as Chan rolled out, armed with jackhammer and diamond saw. She fidgeted, though, as only a shapechanger can fidget, becoming Barbara and Harry and dozens of other human forms—and various things in between that looked really revolting.

Chan rolled directly to the area where Nat had been swallowed up. The creature was rolling away with him, as it evidently had done with the crawler, though progress was slow. It would heave and tug and Nat's suit/tank would reluctantly tip over. Fiona followed it with the crawler, which had not been harmed by its encounter, except for a light coating of greasy mucus, which the hot wind had dried to tacky gum.

They passed very close by the other crawler, Chan's, and its situation was now clear. One of the rug creatures had flopped over it and tied it in place with dozens of filaments. It was on the creature's edge, so it could see out, but it was immobilized.

If the thing had once been round, like the one that had captured Nat, it was round no longer. It was a thick tough rectangle pasted down over the crawler, presenting a minimum surface to the wind. Fiona appreciated the common sense of that, and changed herself into a thick tough rectangle to get the feel of it, keeping human eyes and arms in case something happened to Chan.

It did. Fiona saw it through both crawlers' wide-angle sensors. As soon as Chan came grinding into view, the creature expelled Nat, almost as if it were spitting him out, and attacked Chan with incredible speed and dexterity. If it was not intelligent, it certainly had complex instincts, able to tack swiftly into the wind, warping its shape by casting tendrils to rocks left and right.

Fiona shouted a warning and Chan was ready for the creature, glittering circular saw raised up at the end of the suit's service arm. The creature paid no attention to the danger; it just loomed up and flopped over onto its prey.

At first it looked as if Chan had been successful; the saw ripped a two-meter slash through the creature's back. Fiona, still grey and rectangular, winced in empathy. But the tear closed up seamlessly. The saw emerged at another spot and ripped again, and twice again, always with no lasting result.

While the saw was visible, Fiona could hear a faint signal from Chan; otherwise the suit was silent. Perhaps the creature was a good conductor of electricity, and became a sort of Faraday cage.

"Nat," she said, "do you read me?"

Nat's picture appeared on a small screen, distorted by the close-up lens. He flinched so hard his safety helmet clanked against the top of the suit. "Barbara? What the hell?"

"Sorry." She changed back into Fiona's shape. "I was trying something out. Look, did you use electricity on the thing?"

"You mean try to shock it? No . . . good idea, I guess. But I don't have any open circuits. I could come in to base and get a power cell."

"I'll bring one out. You keep an eye on Chan."

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"Chan's out here?"

"Off to your left somewhere, trapped under the thing that just spat you out."

"Jesus. I guess you better—but hold it. You don't have a suit."

"Nat . . . I don't exactly *have* slinky dresses and that leather stuff you like." Fiona flowed off the chair and headed for the service dome. She picked up a portable radio and a heavy-duty power cell, the kind that the suits used, to which she attached a pair of thick cables with strong alligator clips.

She flattened out into a flexible rug and experimented with pseudopods for a few minutes. Once she was confident that she could get around that way, pulling herself along, she made pockets for the power cell and radio, and slid out through the airlock and into the storm.

She remembered the way Nat and Chan had gone, but couldn't follow it directly. She had to survey the lay of the land and plan a zigzag path, taking wind direction into account. It was tiring, hauling herself from rock to rock, and quickly depleted her, but she found she didn't have to worry about hunger or thirst. A lot of the rocks were covered with a thin scum of hardy fungus. It tasted pretty good and, although it was drier than dust, she could synthesize water from its carbohydrates. The hail of pebbles didn't bother her, either; she just absorbed and excreted them. They hit with a great deal of force, but of course she had chosen not to complicate her skin with pain receptors. Likewise, when she grabbed those razor-sharp rocks, they sometimes sliced off a piece of pseudopod, but as long as she paid attention and resorbed the piece, no harm was done. All in all, it was a pleasant experience. She resolved to get out more often.

She was able to sneak up on them from behind a low outcropping of black crystal. Nat was watching helplessly while the vibrating nose of Chan's jackhammer poked out of the creature's skin here and there.

She took out the radio and the power cell. To keep her pseudopods free, she consumed the handset and manufactured an internal ear and voicebox. "Nat," she whispered, "I'm about fifty meters behind you. You might want to get out of the way. This thing could short out your suit."

"What about Chan? What about yourself?"

"Chan's external sensors might short out, but the life support system's isolated. Don't worry about me. I've got it figured out." In fact, with a microsecond of warning, Fiona could use the electricity from the power cell as fuel. She wouldn't get electrocuted, just bloated.

The thing had abandoned Nat when a new target presented itself. She hoped it would do that again. She anchored herself with three pseudopods, grasped the power cables in two others, changed her color to bright orange and stood up straight on a temporary bone of aluminum and iron, three meters tall, vibrating in the wind.

It happened so fast that they had to reconstruct it later with slow motion analysis. The thing unwrapped itself from Chan and simply let go. Fiona was not more than ten degrees from being precisely downwind; it fluttered over and snagged her with a pair of filaments and wrapped itself around her in a tight package.

There was a blue nimbus of electrical discharge and bright arcs sparkled down in several places. The radio gave a roar of white noise that slowly sputtered out. "Oh, my," Fiona said in a small voice. The cables dropped to the ground. "Oh . . . Chan . . . Nat . . . you just don't know. . . ."

"What? Are you all right, Fiona?"

She shrank to half size, spars growing out of both sides to form a cross.

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Then four more spars grew out, to make an eight-ribbed circle, Fiona's orange on one side and the alien's grey on the other.

"My God," Nat said. "Are they mating?"

"Men," Fiona said, and her radio dropped to the ground with a clatter. She, or the two of them, rolled off smoothly toward the horizon.

"Chan. Are you okay?"

"I think so. What the hell was that?"

"I'm not sure. But I think we better get back to the base. Real quick."

They called their supervisor as soon as they got in. Julie was not sympathetic, although she did say that Nat looked good in a diaper. No, they could not be issued a new morph. If records showed that they were not directly responsible for its loss, its cost would not be deducted from their pay. The xenologist from Earth would come down, as scheduled, at the end of their term, and evaluate the new life form. If it turned out to make any profit, the two of them would split one tenth of one percent finders' fee.

Meanwhile, just hold down the fort. You'll just have to rough it; no lover, maid, or cook.

"I've never cooked," Nat said. "You?"

"Grits," Chan said. "Rice, maybe. We always had a dispensary at home."

"Me, too. Hope we've got plenty of peanut butter."

They went back to the galley, which neither of them had paid much attention to before, and found that even grits and rice would be somewhat difficult. To save space, the food was packed in small foil-covered lumps, identified with tiny bar-code blocks. There were heating and refrigerating units, but they didn't have controls and didn't respond to voice commands. They had to drop the lumps into hot tap water and try to identify the result. It was not a good situation for two picky eaters.

After 287 days, they weren't exactly, literally, fucking bats, but they were watching a great deal of distracting VR, each of them alone in his individual headset. Every tenth day, Julie called to ask whether they were still alive. Other than that exciting contact, it was VR and random tepid foodlike glop.

On the 287th day, Nat was experiencing *Blond Bimbo Barbarians* for about the fiftieth time, and the visual and somatic in/outputs faded to black. When his eyes and body focused, he saw that Barbara was straddling him.

"Hello, Nat." He looked to his right and saw that Chan was still locked away in another world.

"Are you real?"

"After a fashion." She demonstrated that for awhile, and then they lay together, a tight fit, on the VR couch. "It's time to go home."

"You finally got tired of your pancake buddies?"

She stretched luxuriously. "Not really." She got up from the couch in an unsettling sinuous curl. "We've learned a lot from each other." She turned into the image of one, sort of like a huge doormat precariously balanced on one edge.

"Oh, please," Nat said. "Be anything else."

"Okay." She changed into a stocky samurai warrior, complete with sword. "Look behind you."

Nat slowly turned and was not completely surprised to see two perfect replicas of himself. While he watched, one of them changed into Chan. "Time to go home," it said, with a perfect Martian accent.

Then they both changed to match Barbara's samurai. They raised their swords and stepped forward in unison. O

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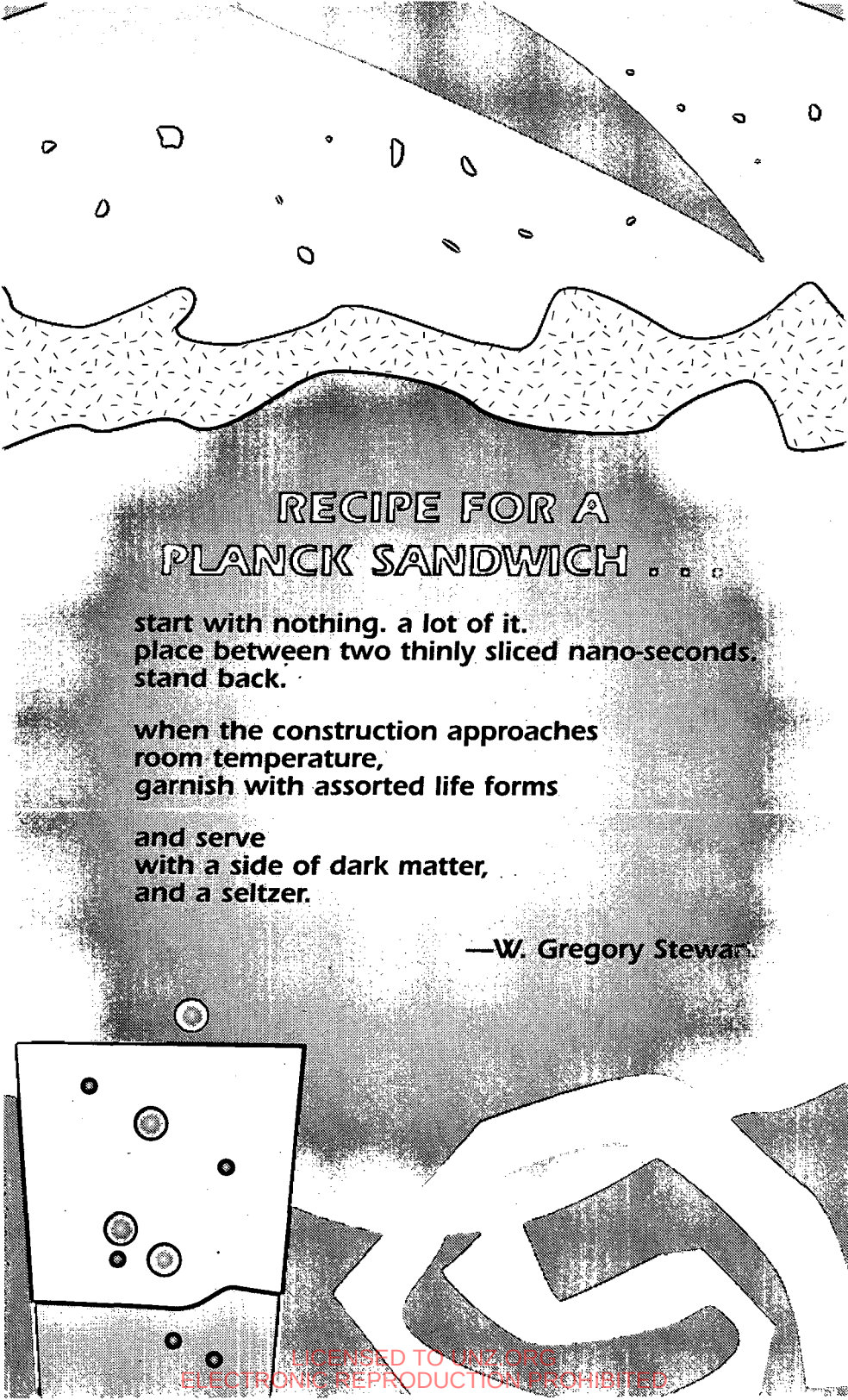
RECIPE FOR A
PLANCK SANDWICH . . .
start with nothing. a lot of it.
place between two thinly sliced nano-seconds.
stand back.
when the construction approaches
room temperature,
garnish with assorted life forms
and serve
with a side of dark matter,
and a seltzer.
—W. Gregory Stewart

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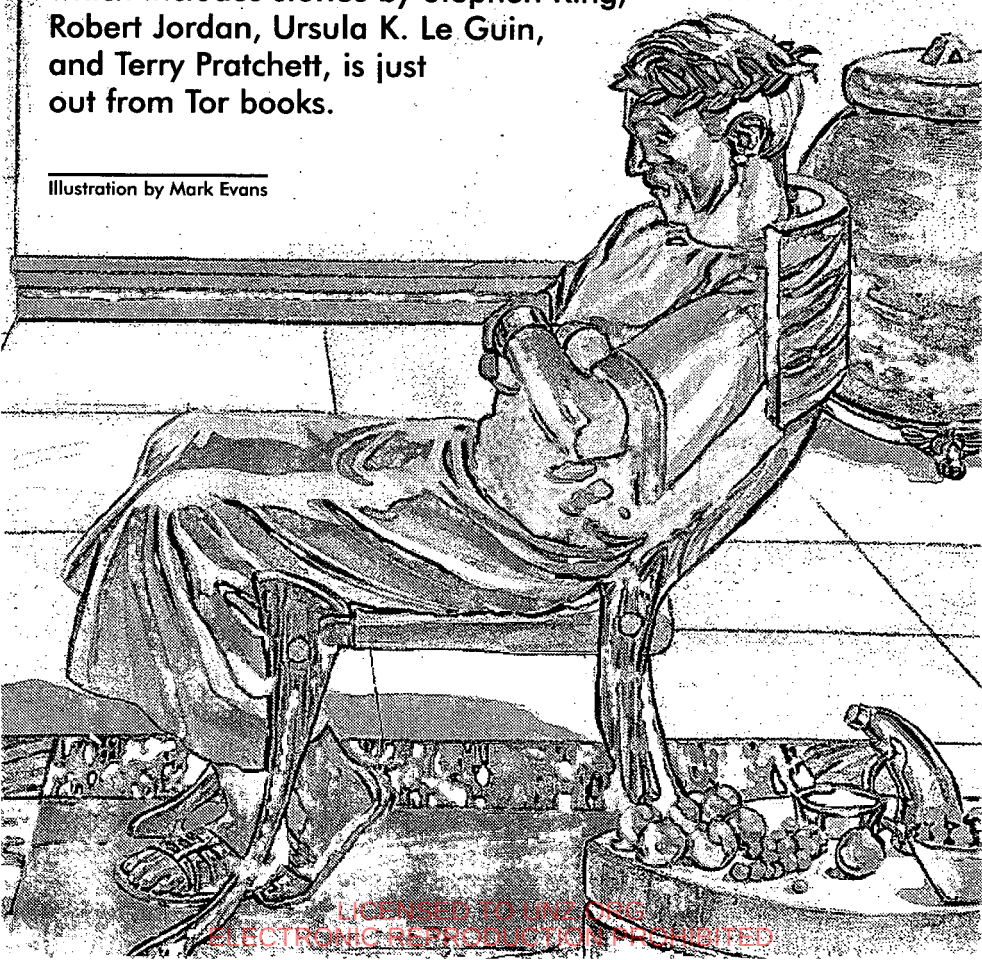
Robert Silverberg

WAITING FOR THE END

Our eloquent editorialist presents us with a captivating new tale from his Roma Eterna sequence. HarperPrism recently released Mr. Silverberg's latest novel, *The Alien Years*, and the paperback edition of *Sorcerers of Magipoor*. His blockbuster fantasy anthology *Legends*, which includes stories by Stephen King, Robert Jordan, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Terry Pratchett, is just out from Tor books.

Illustration by Mark Evans



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FOREWORD

Over the past seven or eight years I've sporadically been developing an alternate-world scenario in which the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses never happened. Since the Jews never reached Palestine, Christianity never developed and Rome remained pagan, renewing itself constantly during the period we call the Dark Ages, fending off the invasions of the barbarians and sustaining itself as a thriving worldwide empire for thousands of years. The history of Rome in this alternate world is generally identical to that of our *Rome as it developed through the fourth century* A.D., *when Constantine the Great first divided the Empire into eastern and western domains, but then things began to diverge.*

The timeline of the Roma Eterna stories runs from 753 B.C., *the traditional date of the founding of the city; thus our year 1999 is 2752 by Roman reckoning. The story "An Outpost of the Empire"* (Asimov's, *November 1991), *which is set in the Roman year 2206, our year 1453, is told by a woman of the Byzantine—Eastern—Empire who describes the restoration of Roman power in Western Europe after a long period of domination by the East. "Waiting for the End" is a prequel to that story, taking place 250 years earlier—the Roman year 1951; by our reckoning,* A.D. *1198—and providing a look at the invasion of Rome by the Byzantines and the apparent fall of the Roman Empire.*

—Robert Silverberg

The uglier of the two Praetorians, flat-faced and gruff, with close-cropped red hair and thick Slavic cheekbones, said, "The Emperor wants you, Antipater. Has some work for you, he says."

"Translation work," said the prettier guardsman, a ringleted blond Gaul. "The latest little love note from our friends the Greeks, I guess. Or maybe he wants you to write one for him to them." He gave Antipater a flirtatious little wink-and-wriggle, mock-seductive. The Praetorians all thought Antipater was of that sort, probably because he had such a sleek, well-oiled Levantine look about him, but perhaps merely because he was fluent in Greek. They were wrong, though. He was a slim-hipped, dusky-skinned, dark-haired man of somewhat feline gait and undeniably Eastern appearance, yes, but that was simply an artifact of his ancestry, the heritage of his long-ago Syrian forefathers. His understanding of Greek was a requirement of his job, not an advertisement of his sexual tastes. But he was at least as Roman as either of them. And as for his preference for woman's embraces, they need only ask Justina Botaniates, to name just one.

"Where is His Majesty now?" Antipater asked coolly.

"The Emerald Office," replied the Slav. "Greek Letters, he said. Get me the Master of Greek Letters." He glanced at his companion and his broad face writhed in a heavy grin. "We'll all be masters of Greek letters soon enough, won't we, Marius?"

"Those of us who can read and write, at any rate," said the Gaul. "Eh? Eh? —Well, get along with you now, Antipater! Don't keep Caesar waiting!"

They had no respect. They were crude men. Antipater was a high palatine official and they were mere soldiers, and they had no business ordering him about. He glared them down and they backed away, and he gathered up his tablets and stylus and went down the dimly lit halls of the palace annex to the tunnel that led to the main building, and thence to the row of small private offices—Emerald, Scarlet, Indigo, Topaz—clustered along the east side of the

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Great Hall of Audience. The Emerald Office, the farthest in the series, was the Emperor Maximilianus's favorite, a long narrow windowless room hung with draperies of Indian weave, dark-green in hue, on which scenes of men with spears hunting elephants and tigers and other fantastic creatures were depicted.

"Lucius Aelius Antipater," he told the guard on duty, a vacant-eyed boy of eighteen or so, whom he had never seen before. "Master of Greek Letters to Caesar." The boy nodded him on through, not even bothering with the routine check for concealed weapons.

Antipater wondered about today's assignment. An outgoing letter, he supposed. In these dark days, three or four went out for every one that came in. Yet what was there to write about, with the Greek army on the verge of pouring across the Western Empire's porously defended frontiers? Surely not still another stern ultimatum addressed to Roma's great enemy the Basileus Andronicus, ordering him to cease and desist at once from further military encroachment on the Imperial domain. They had sent the latest in the long series of such ultimatums only last week. The courier most likely was no farther east with it yet than Macedonia, certainly was still a long way from delivering it to the Basileus in Constantinopolis. Where it would only be tossed aside with a snort of amusement, like all the rest.

No, Antipater decided. This one had to be something more unusual. A letter from Caesar to some slippery Byzantine lordling on the African coast of the Great Sea, say—the exarch of Alexandria, maybe, or of Carthage—urging him, with the promise of immense bribes, to defect to the Roman side and launch some surprise attack from the rear, one that would distract Andronicus long enough for Roma to recover its balance and mobilize its long overdue counterthrust against the invaders.

A wild stratagem indeed. Nobody but he would ever think of it. "The trouble with you, Lucius Aelius," Justina liked to tell him, "is that you have too much imagination for your own good."

Maybe so. But here he was, just thirty-two years old that year—which was the year 1951 since the founding of the city—and for two years now he had been a member of the high palatinate, the Emperor's inner circle. Caesar had already bestowed a knighthood on him and a seat in the Senate would surely be next. Not bad going for a poor lad from the provinces. A pity that he had achieved his spectacular rise to prominence just as the Empire itself, weakened by its own senseless imprudence, seemed to be about to collapse.

"Caesar?" he said, peering into the Emerald Office.

At first Antipater saw no one. Then, by the smoky light of two dim tapers burning in a far corner of the room, he perceived the Emperor at his desk, the venerable imperial desk of dark exotic woods that had been occupied in the past by the likes of Aemilius Magnus and Metellus Domitius and Publius Clemens and, for all Antipater knew, by Augustus and Hadrianus and Diocletianus as well. Great Caesars all; but the huge curving desk seemed to swallow their current successor, a pallid wiry little man with a glint of wholly justified worry in his close-set, sea-green, brightly shining eyes. He was wearing a simple gray jerkin and a peasant's red leggings; only the faint thread of pearls running along one shoulder, flanked by a pair of purple stripes, indicated that his rank was anything out of the ordinary.

He bore a grand name, did Maximilianus. It had been Maximilianus III, Maximilianus the Great, who had beaten the wandering barbarians of the north into submission once and for all, the Huns and Goths and Vandals and the rest of that unruly shaggy-haired crowd. But that had been seven hun-

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dred years before, and this Maximilianus, Maximilianus VI, possessed none of his famous namesake's fire and drive. Once again the Empire was at risk, tottering on the brink, in truth, as it had seemed to be in that other Maximilianus's far-off time. But this latter-day Maximilianus was not very likely to be its savior.

"You summoned me, Caesar?"

"Oh, Antipater. Yes. Look at this, Antipater." The Emperor held a yellow vellum scroll out toward him. So what needed translation was an incoming document of some sort, then. Antipater noticed that the Emperor's hand was quivering.

The Emperor, as a matter of fact, seemed to have turned overnight into a palsied old man. There were tics and tremors all over him. And he was only fifty, too. But he had held the throne for twenty grueling years now, and his reign had been a hard one from its very first hour, when news of his father's death had reached him virtually at the same moment as word of the Greek thrust westward into the African proconsular region. That African invasion was the first major escalation of what had until then been a slow-burning border dispute confined to the province of Dalmatia, a dispute that had blossomed, through subsequent Greek probes along the border separating the two empires, into a full-scale war between East and West that now seemed to be entering its final dismal phase.

Antipater unrolled the scroll and began quickly to scan it.

"This was intercepted at sea by one of our patrols," said the Emperor. "Just south of Sardinia. Greek ship, it was, disguised as a fishing vessel, sailing northward out of Sicilia. I can understand some of what the message says, of course—"

"Yes," Antipater said. "Of course, Caesar." All educated men knew Greek; but it was the Greek of Homer and Sophocles and Plato that was taught in the academies of Roma, not the very different modern-day Byzantine version spoken from Illyricum eastward to Armenia and Mesopotamia. Languages do change. The Latin of Maximilianus VI's Roma wasn't the Latin of Virgil and Cicero, either. It was for his fluency in modern Greek that Antipater had won his place at court.

He moved swiftly through the casually scrawled words. And very quickly he realized why the Emperor was trembling.

"Merciful God defend us!" he muttered, when he was only halfway through.

"Yes," said the Emperor. "Yes. If only he would."

"What it was," said Antipater to Justina that evening in his small but pleasantly situated apartments on the Palatine Hill, "was a dispatch from the Byzantine admiral in Sicilia to the commander of a second Greek fleet that seems to be moored off the western coast of Sardinia, although we didn't know until now that any such fleet was there. The message instructs the commander of the Sardinian naval force to proceed on a northerly route past Corsica toward the mainland and capture our two ports on the Ligurian coast. Antipolis and Nicaea, their names are."

He had no business telling her anything of this. Not only was he revealing military secrets, an act that in theory was punishable by death, but she was a Greek, to boot. A daughter of the famed Botaniates family, no less, which had supplied illustrious generals to the Byzantine Emperors for three hundred years. It was fully probable that some of the Greek legions that were march-

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ing toward Roma at this very moment were under the command of distant cousins of hers.

But he could withhold nothing from her. He loved her. He trusted her. Justina would never betray him. Like him, she was of Greek ancestry, yes—a Botaniates, even, although from a secondary and impoverished branch of the family. But just as his people had given up their allegiance to Byzantium to seek better opportunities in the Western Empire, so had hers. The only difference was that his family had Romanized itself three and a half centuries back and hers had crossed over when she was a little girl. She still felt more comfortable speaking in Greek than in Latin. Yet to her the Byzantines were "the Greeks" and the Romans were "us." That was sufficient for him.

"I was in Nicaea once," she said. "A beautiful little place, mountains behind it, lovely villas all along the coast. The climate is very mild. The mountains shelter it from the north winds that come down out of the middle of Europe. You see palm trees everywhere, and there are plants in bloom all winter long, red, yellow, purple, white. Flowers of every color."

"It isn't as a winter resort that the Basileus wants it," Antipater said. They had just finished dinner: grilled breast of pheasant, baked asparagus, a decent bottle of the smooth sweet golden-hued wine of Rhodes. Even here in wartime fine Greek wines were still available in Roma, if only to the fortunate members of the imperial elite, though with the eastern ports suffering from the Byzantine blockade the stocks were unlikely to last much longer. "Here. Look at this, Justina."

He snatched up a tablet and quickly sketched a rough map: the long peninsula of Italia with Sicilia at its tip, the coastline of Liguria curving away along the mainland to the west with the two big islands of Corsica and Sardinia in the sea to the south of it, and that of Dalmatia to the east. With emphatic little dots of his stylus he marked in Antipolis and Nicaea on the coast just to the left of the place where Italia began its southward thrust out of the heart of Europe toward the African shore.

Justina rose and walked around to his side of the table so that she could stand behind him and peer over his shoulder. The fragrance of her perfume drifted toward him, that maddeningly wonderful Arabian myrrh of hers that also could no longer be bought in Roma because of the Greek blockade, and his heart began to pound. He had never known anyone quite like this little Greek. She was a light-boned, delicately built woman: tiny, actually, but with sudden and surprisingly voluptuous curves at hip and bosom. They had been lovers for the past eighteen months and even now, Antipater was convinced, she had not yet exhausted her entire repertoire of passionate tricks.

"All right," he said, compelling himself rigorously to focus on the matter at hand. He gestured toward the lower part of his map. "The Greeks have already come across from Africa, just a short hop, and established a beachhead in Sicilia. It would be child's play for them to cross the strait at Messana and start marching up the peninsula toward the capital. The Emperor expects that some such move is imminent, and he's stationed half the home legions down here in the south, in Calabria, to keep them from getting any closer to us than the vicinity of Neapolis, let alone all the way up to Roma. Now, over here in the northeast"—Antipater indicated the upper right corner of the peninsula, where Italia bordered on the provinces of Pannonia and Dalmatia, which now were fully under Byzantine control—"we have the other half of the home army, guarding the border out back of Venetia against the inevitable push from that direction. The rest of our northern frontier, the territories bordering

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on Gallia and Belgica, is secure at this time and we aren't anticipating any Greek attempt to break through from that direction. But now, consider this—"

He tapped the stylus against the western shores of Sardinia and Corsica.

"Somehow," he said, "Andronicus seems to have managed to get a fleet up the far side of these two islands, where we haven't expected them to go sniffing around at all. Possibly they marched westward along the African shore and secretly built a bunch of ships somewhere on the Mauritanian coast. However they did it, they're there, apparently, and now they're in a position to outflank us on the west. They sail up past Corsica and seize the Ligurian seacoast, and then they use Nicaea and Antipolis as bases to send an army down the peninsula through Genua and Pisae and Viterbo and right on into Roma, and there's not a thing we can do about it. Not with half our army tied up on the northeast frontier to keep them from moving against us out of Dalmatia and the other half waiting south of Neapolis for an invasion from Sicilia. There isn't any third half to defend the city from a fast attack on our unguarded side."

"Can't the frontier legions be pulled down out of central Gallia to defend the Ligurian ports?" Justina asked.

"Not quickly enough to head off a Greek landing there. And in any case if we yanked troops out of Gallia, the Greeks could simply move their forces westward from Dalmatia, break into Gallia Transalpina themselves, and come down out of the mountains at us the way Hannibal did fifteen hundred years ago." Antipater shook his head. "No, we're boxed in. They've got us on three sides at once, and that's one too many."

"But the message to the Sardinian commander was intercepted before it got to him," Justina pointed out. "He doesn't know that he's supposed to bring his ships north."

"Do you think they sent only one such message?"

"What if they did, and it was never intended to reach the Sardinian commander in the first place? I mean, what if was a hoax?"

He stared. "A *hoax,* did you say?"

"Suppose that in fact there's no Greek fleet at all anchored west of Sardinia. But Andronicus wants us to think that there is, and therefore he had this fake message sent out for us to intercept, so that we'd get flustered and move troops toward Liguria to meet the nonexistent invasion force there. Which would open up a hole on one of the other fronts that his forces could stroll right through."

What a bizarre notion! For a moment Antipater was taken aback by the thought that Justina could come up with anything so far-fetched. Far-fetched ideas were supposed to be *his* specialty, not hers. But then he felt a surge of delight and admiration at the fertility of her imagination.

He grinned at her in an access of overflowing love. "Oh, Justina! You really are a Greek, aren't you?"

A quick flash of surprise and puzzlement sparkled in the shining black depths of her eyes.

"What?"

"Subtle, I mean. Inscrutable. Dark and devious of thought. The mind that could hatch an idea like that—"

She did not seem flattered. Annoyed, rather: she responded with a quirk of the full lips, a toss of her head. The carefully appointed row of jet-black curls across her forehead was thrown into disarray. She swept them back into place with a crisp peremptory gesture. "If I could hatch it, so could the

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Basileus Andronicus. So could you, Lucius. It's perfectly obvious. Cook up a false message and deliberately let it be captured, precisely so that Caesar will go into a panic and pull his forces away from places they ought to be and into places where they aren't needed."

"Yes. Of course. But I think the message is genuine, myself."

"Does Caesar? How did he react when you read it to him?"

"He pretended to be calm and cool and completely unruffled."

"Pretended?"

"Pretended, yes. But his hand was shaking when he gave me the scroll. He already knew roughly what it said, and it frightened him."

"He's an old man, Lucius."

"Not really. Not in terms of years, anyway." Antipater rose and went to the window, and stood there staring out into the gathering gray of dusk. The lights of the capital were beginning to gleam on the dark hills all around. A beautiful sight; he never tired of it. His place, well down the hill from the royal palace itself, was far from majestic, but it had a choice location in the quarter of the Palatine reserved for top-level civil servants. From his portico he could see the great grim bulk of the ancient Coliseum where it rose against the horizon, and the lower end of the Forum below it, and the nearby sector of the splendiferous jumbled arc of marbled buildings of all eras that stretched off to the east, awesome structures going back hundreds and hundreds of years: back, some of them, to the time of Augustus and Nero and the first Trajan.

He had been fifteen, a greenhorn from the not very significant city of Salona in the not very significant province of Dalmatia, when he first saw the city of Roma. He had never outgrown the wonder that the capital inspired in him, not even now, when he moved daily among the great men of the realm and had come to understand only too clearly how far from great in truth they were. Yes, of course, they were mere grasping mortals like everyone else. But the city was great, the greatest, indeed, that had ever existed in the world, or ever would.

Was all this to be looted and torched now by the triumphant Byzantines, as it had been by the Gauls, so it was said, sixteen hundred years before? Or—what was more likely—would the Greeks just walk in and effortlessly take possession, destroying nothing, simply making themselves the masters of the *city* out of which their own empire had sprung once upon a time?

Justina came up behind him and pressed herself close. He felt her breasts flattening against his back. Their tips seemed to him to be hard.

Softly she said, "Lucius, what are we going to do now?"

"In the next five minutes, or the next three months?"

"You know what I mean."

"If the Greeks take Roma, you mean?"

"Not if. *When.*"

He answered without turning toward her. "I don't actually think that will happen, Justina."

"You just said that there's no way we can defend ourselves against attacks coming from three directions at once."

"I know. But I want to believe that I'm wrong. The Emperor has called a meeting of the Great Council first thing tomorrow, and maybe someone's got a battle plan that I don't know about."

"Or maybe not."

"Even so," Antipater said. "Let's say that the worst happens: that they

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march against the city and we surrender, and the Greeks take control of the Western Empire. Nothing much should change, if they do. They're civilized people, after all. They might even want to keep the Emperor around as a puppet ruler, if he's willing. In any event they'll still need civil servants who are fluent in both languages. My position should be safe."

"And mine?"

"Yours?"

"You're a Roman citizen, Lucius. You look like a Greek, yes, and why not, considering that your people came originally from Syria—from Antioch, isn't that so? But your family's been living in the Western Empire for centuries and centuries and you were born in a Roman province. Whereas I—"

"You're Roman too."

"Yes, if you believe that Byzantines are Romans just because they say that their country is the Roman Empire and their emperor calls himself King of the Romans. But Greek is what they speak and Greek is what they are. And I'm a Greek, Lucius."

"A naturalized citizen of Rome, though."

"Am I?"

Startled, he swung around to face her. "You are, aren't you?"

"What I am is an Asian Greek. That isn't any secret. My family's from Ephesus, originally. When my father's shipping business went bad we moved to Athens and he started over. When he lost three ships in the same storm he went bankrupt and we left for the Western Empire to escape his creditors. I was three years old then. We lived in Syracuse in Sicilia at first, and then in Neapolis, and after my father died I moved to Roma. But nowhere along the way did I become a Roman citizen."

"I never knew that," Antipater said.

"Well, you do now."

"All the same, what does it matter?"

"It doesn't, maybe, so long as Maximilianus is Emperor. But what happens after the Byzantines take over? Can't you figure that out, Lucius? A Botaniates who sleeps with Romans? They'll punish me as a traitor!"

"Nonsense. Roma's full of Greeks. Always has been. Syrian Greeks, Armenian Greeks, Aiguptian Greeks, Cappadocian Greeks, even Greek Greeks. Once Andronicus's crowd is in charge, they won't care a rat's ass who was sleeping with whom."

But she clung to him, terrified. He had never seen her like this. "How do you know? I'm afraid of what might happen. Let's run away, Lucius. Before they get here."

"And go where?"

"Does it matter? Somewhere. Anywhere. Just so long as it's far from here."

He wondered how he could calm her. She seemed to be in the grip of inordinate unthinking fear. Her face was pale, her eyes had a glassy sheen, her breath was coming in little sobbing gusts.

"Please, Justina. *Please.*"

He took her hands in his for a moment, then slid his fingers up her arms until they rested along her collarbones. Tenderly he kneaded the muscles of her neck, trying to soothe her. "Nothing will happen to us," he said gently. "The Empire hasn't fallen yet, for one thing. It isn't necessarily going to, despite the way everything looks right now. It's survived some pretty bad things in the past and it may well survive this. The Basileus Andronicus might drop dead tomorrow. The sea might swallow his fleet the way it did

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your father's ships. Or Jupiter and Mars might suddenly appear in front of the Capitol and lead us to a glorious victory. Anything might happen. I don't know. But even if the Empire does fall, it won't be the end of the world, Justina. You and I will be all right." He stared intensely into her eyes. Could he make her believe something that he didn't fully believe himself? "You—and—I—will—be—all—right—"

"Oh, Lucius—"

"We'll be all right. Yes." Antipater folded her small body up against his and held her close until her breathing sounded normal again and he could feel her taut frame beginning to relinquish its tension. And then—a transition so swift that it almost made him want to chuckle—her entire body softened and her hips began to move slowly from side to side. She pressed herself close, wriggling in unmistakable invitation. Her eyes were closed, her nostrils were distended, her tongue flickered like a serpent's between her lips. Yes. Yes. Everything *would* be all right, somehow. They would close the walls in around themselves and ignore all that was going on outside. "Come," he said. He drew her toward the waiting bedchamber.

The Great Council of State assembled at the second hour of morning in the grand velvet-hung chamber known as the Hall of Marcus Anastasius on the south side of the imperial palace. Both Consuls were there, and half a dozen senior figures of the Senate, and Cassius Cestianus, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and Cocceius Maridianus, the Secretary for Home Affairs, and seven or eight other government ministers as well, and a formidable battery of retired generals and naval officers. So, too, were the key members of the imperial household: Aurelius Gellius, the Praetorian Prefect, and Domitius Pompeianus, the Master of Latin Letters, and Quintilius Vinicius, the Keeper of the Imperial Treasury, and more. To Antipater's astonishment, even Germanicus Antoninus Caesar, the Emperor's rascally younger brother, had come. His presence was appropriate, since at least in theory he was the heir to the throne; but never had Antipater seen that wastrel prince at any sort of council meeting before, nor, to Antipater's recollection, had Germanicus ever been visible in public at all at such an early hour of the day. When he came sauntering in now, it caused a palpable stir.

The Emperor began the proceedings by asking Antipater to read the captured Greek scroll aloud.

"Demetrios Chrysoloras, Grand Admiral of the Imperial Fleet, to His Excellency Nicholas Chalcocondyles of Trebizond, Commander of Western Naval Forces, greetings! Be advised by these documents, O Nicholas, of the unanswerable will of His Most Puissant Imperial Majesty and Supreme Master of All Regions, Andronicus Maniakes, who by the grace of God holds the exalted title of King of the Romans and Lord Autocrat of—"

"Will you spare us this Greek foolishness, Antipater, and get to the essence of the matter?" came a drawling voice from the side of the chamber.

Antipater, rattled, looked up. His eyes met those of Germanicus Caesar. It was he who had spoken. The Emperor's brother, lounging in his chair as though at a banquet, was rouged and pomaded to gaudy effect, and his purple-edged white robe was rumpled and stained with wine. Antipater understood now how Germanicus had managed to be here at this early hour: he had simply come directly to the palace after some all-night party.

The prince, smirking at him across the room, made a little impatient circling gesture with his hand. Obediently Antipater skimmed silently through

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the rest of the flourish of Byzantine pomp with which the letter opened and began reading again from the middle of the scroll:

"—to hoist anchor forthwith and undertake the northerly road, keeping well clear of Corsica isle, so that you journey straightaway to the Ligurian province of the Western Empire and make yourself the master of the ports of Antipolis and Nicaea—"

There was murmuring in the chamber already. These people had no need of maps in order to visualize the maritime movements that were involved. Or to grasp the nature of the danger to the city of Roma that the presence of a Greek fleet in those waters would pose.

Antipater closed the scroll and put it down.

The Emperor looked toward him and said, "Would you say, Antipater, that this document is authentic?"

"It's written in good upper-class Byzantine Greek, Majesty. I don't recognize the handwriting, but it's that of a capable scribe, the sort who'd be attached to an important admiral's staff. And the seal looks like a genuine one."

"Thank you, Antipater." Maximilianus sat quietly for a moment, staring into the distance. Then he let his gaze travel slowly along the rows of Roma's great leaders. At last it came to bear on the frail figure of Aurelianus Arcadius Ablabius, who had had command of the Tyrrhenian Sea fleet until his retirement to the capital for reasons of health a year before. "Explain to me, Ablabius, how a Byzantine armada could make its way up from Sicily to the Sardinian coast without our so much as noticing the fact. Tell us about the Empire's naval bases along the west coast of Sardinia, if you will, Ablabius."

Ablabius, a thin, chalk-white man with pale blue eyes, moistened his lips and said, "Majesty, we *have* no significant naval bases on the west coast of Sardinia. Our ports are Calaris in the southeast and Olbia in the northeast. We have small outposts at Bosa and Othoca in the west, nothing more. The island is desolate and unhealthy and we have not seen the need to fortify it greatly."

"Under the assumption, I suppose, that our enemies of the Eastern Empire were not likely to slip around us and attack us from the west?"

"This is so, majesty," said Ablabius, visibly squirming.

"Ah. Ah. So nobody is watching the sea from western Sardinia. How interesting. Tell me about Corsica, now, Ablabius. Do we have a military base somewhere along the western coast of that island, perhaps?"

"There are no good harbors in the west at all, Caesar. The mountains come right down to the sea. Our bases are on the eastern shore, at Aleria and Mariana. It is another wild, useless island."

"So, then, if a Greek fleet should succeed in entering the waters west of Sardinia, it would have clear sailing right on up to the Ligurian coast, is that right, Ablabius? We have no naval force whatsoever guarding that entire sea, is what you're saying?"

"Essentially, yes, your majesty," said Ablabius, in a very small voice.

"Ah. Thank you, Ablabius." The Emperor Maximilianus once more traversed the room with his gaze. This time his eyes did not come to rest, but circled unceasingly about, as though he saw no place to land.

The tense hush was broken at last by Erucius Glabro, the senior Consul, a noble-looking hawk-nosed man who traced his ancestry back to the earliest years of the Empire. He had had imperial pretensions himself, once, thirty or forty years back, but he was old now and generally thought to have become

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very foolish. "This is a serious matter, Caesar! If they land an army on the coast and begin marching toward Genua, we'd have no way of keeping them from coming on all the way down to the city itself."

The Emperor smiled. He looked immensely weary. "Thank you for stating the obvious, Glabro. I was certain that I could count on you for that."

"Majesty—"

"Thank you, I said." The senior Consul shriveled back into his seat. The Emperor, his glinting narrow eyes roaming the group once more, said, "We have, I think, four choices here. We could transfer the army under Julius Fronto from the Gallian frontier to the vicinity of Genua, and hope that they'll get there in time to meet any Greek force coming eastward along the Ligurian coast. But in all probability they'd be too late. Or we could bring the forces commanded by Claudius Lentulus across from Venetia to hold the Genuan border. That would probably work, but it would leave our northeastern frontier wide open to the army that Andronicus has in Dalmatia, and we'd see them in Ravenna or even Florentia before we knew what was happening. On the other hand, we could call the army of Sempronius Rufus northward from Calabria to defend the capital, bring Lentulus south to Tuscia and Umbria, and abandon the rest of the peninsula to the Greeks. That would put us back to where we were two thousand years ago, I suppose, but the chances seem fairly good that we could hold out here in the ancient Roman heartland for a long time."

There was another long silence.

Then Germanicus Caesar said, in that lazy, offensive drawl of his, "I think you said that we had *four* choices, brother. You've mentioned only three."

The Emperor did not look displeased. He seemed actually to be amused. "Very good, brother! Very *good!* There *is* a fourth choice. Which is to do nothing at all, to ignore this captured message entirely, to sit tight with our defenses in their present configuration and allow the Greeks to make whatever moves they have in mind."

Antipater heard a few gasps of astonishment; and then there commenced a wild general hubbub. The Emperor, motionless, arms folded across his breast, lips curving into the faintest of smiles, waited for it to die down. As order began to return the voice of the Consul Herennius Capito could be heard clearly asking, "Would that not be the suicide of our nation, Caesar?"

"You might argue that any response at all that we might make at this time would be suicidal," said the Emperor. "Defending ourselves on some new front means leaving some existing front unguarded. Pulling troops from any of our borders now will create a breach through which the enemy can easily move."

"But to take no action whatever, Caesar, while the Greeks are landing an army virtually in our back yard—!"

"Ah, but are they, Capito? What if this message Antipater has just read to us is merely a fraud?"

There was a moment of astounded stillness, after which came a second uproar. "A fraud? A fraud? A fraud?" cried a host of high ministers and imperial counselors all at once. They seemed stunned. As was Antipater as well, for was this not precisely the idea—implausible, absurd—that Justina had proposed to him in the privacy of his apartments the night before?

Antipater listened in amazement as Maximilianus now set forth the argument that the supposed letter of the Grand Admiral Chrysoloras might have been designed purely as a trap, that its intention was to induce the Romans

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to draw their forces away from a military front that was in genuine need of defending and move them to a place where no real threat existed.

That was possible, yes. But was it in any way likely?

Not to Antipater. His father had taught him never to underestimate an enemy's cunning, but by the same token never to overestimate it, either. He had seen often enough how easily you could outsmart yourself by trying to think too many moves ahead in a game. It was far more reasonable, he thought, to believe that the Greeks really did have warships out there beyond Sardinia and were at this moment making ready to grab the Ligurian ports than it was to suppose that the Chrysoloras letter was merely a clever ploy in some game of—what was that game the Persians liked to play?—*chess.* A gigantic game of chess.

But no one could tell the Emperor to his face that a position he had put forth was absurd, or even just improbable. Very swiftly the assembled ministers and counselors could be seen bringing themselves around to an acceptance of the argument that it might not be necessary to react to the Grand Admiral's purported orders to the commander of the Sardinian fleet, because there just might not *be* any Sardinian fleet. Which was the safest way to deal with it, anyway, politically speaking. A decision to do nothing spared them from having to yank Roman legions away from a border point that was quite definitely in danger of imminent attack. Nobody wanted the responsibility for doing that.

In the end, then, the Grand Council voted to take a wait-and-see position; and off went everyone to the Senate-house in the Forum to go through the meaningless ritual of presenting the non-decision to the full Senate for its foreordained ratification.

"Stay a moment," said the Emperor to Antipater, as the others headed for their waiting litters.

"Caesar?"

"I saw you shaking your head, there at the end, when the vote was being tallied."

Antipater saw no purpose in offering a reply. He regarded the Emperor with a blank bland subservient stare.

"You think the Admiral's letter is real, don't you, Antipater?"

"Unquestionably the penmanship and the style of phrasing are Byzantine," said Antipater cautiously. "The seal looks right also."

"I don't mean that. I'm talking about the fleet that we're supposed to believe is lying at anchor off western Sardinia. You think it's actually there."

"Caesar, I am in no position to speculate about—"

"I think it's really there too," Maximilianus said.

"You do, Caesar?"

"Absolutely."

"Then why did you—?"

"Allow them to vote to take no action?" A look of terrible fatigue crossed the Emperor's face. "Because that was the easiest thing, Antipater. It was my duty to bring the letter to their attention. But there's no way we can respond to it, don't you see? Even if the Greeks *are* on their way to Liguria, we don't have any troops to send out there to meet them."

"What will we do, Caesar, if they invade the peninsula?"

"Fight, I suppose," said Maximilianus dully. "What else is there to do? I'll pull Lentulus's army down from the Dalmatian border and bring Sempronius Rufus's men up from the south and we'll hole up in the capital and defend

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ourselves as well as we can." There was no trace of imperial vigor in his voice, not a shred of conviction or fire. He is just striking a pose, Antipater thought, and not working very hard at it, either.

To Antipater the outcome seemed utterly clear.

The Empire is lost, he thought. All we're doing is waiting for the end.

Once he had translated the Chrysoloras letter for the benefit of the Senate, there was no need for Antipater to remain for the rest of the debate, nor did he feel any desire to do so. Disdaining the litter-bearers who were waiting outside to take him back to his office at the palace, he set out on foot into the Forum, wandering blindly and purposelessly through the dense crowds, hoping only to soothe the agitation that pounded through his brain.

But the heat and the myriad chaotic sights and smells and sounds of the Forum only made things worse for him. The Empire's present situation seemed all the more tragic to him here amid the Forum's multitude of glorious gleaming buildings.

Had there ever been an empire like the Roman Empire, in all of history? Or any city like mighty Roma? Surely not, thought Antipater. The greatness of Roma, city and Empire, had been growing steadily with scarcely any check for nearly two thousand years, from the era of the Republic to the coming of the Caesars and then on to the period of grand imperial expansion that took the eagles of Roma into almost every region of the world. By the time that great age of empire-building had come to its natural end, with as much territory under control as was practical to administer, the power of Roma prevailed from the cool gray island of Britannia in the west to Persia and Babylon in the east.

He was aware that there had been a couple of occasions when that pattern of never-ending growth had suffered interruptions, but those were anomalies of long ago. In the modest early days of the Republic the barbarian Gauls had burst in here and burned the city, such as it had been then, but what had their invasion achieved? Only to strengthen the resolve of Roma never to let such a thing happen again; and the Gauls today were placid provincials, their warrior days long forgotten.

And then the business with Carthago—that affair was ancient history, too. The Carthaginian general Hannibal had caused his little disturbance, true, the thing with the elephants, but his invasion had come to nothing, and Roma had razed Carthago to its foundations and then built it all up again as a Roman colony, and the Carthaginians now were a nation of smiling hotelkeepers and restaurateurs who existed to serve the sun-seeking winter-holiday trade from Europe.

This Forum here, this crowded array of temples and law-courts and statues and colonnades and triumphal arches, was the heart and core and nerve-center of the whole splendid Empire. For twelve hundred years, from the time of Julius Caesar to the time of the present Maximilianus, the monarchs of Roma had filled these streets with a stunning conglomeration of glistening marble monuments to the national grandeur. Each building was grand in itself; the totality was altogether overwhelming, and, to Antipater just at this moment, depressing in the very fact of its own splendor. It all seemed like a giant memorial display for the dying realm.

Here, today, this sweltering humid blue-skied day in early autumn, Antipater wandered like a sleepwalker under the blazing golden eye of Sol among the innumerable architectural wonders of the Forum. The mammoth Senate-house, the lofty temples to Augustus and Vespasianus and Antoninus

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Pius and half a dozen other early Emperors who had been proclaimed as gods, the colossal tomb of Julius that had been built hundreds of years after his time by some Emperor who had claimed disingenuously to be his descendant. The arches of Septimius Severus and Constantinus; the five great basilicas; the House of the Vestal Virgins, and on and on and on. There were richly ornamented buildings everywhere, a surfeit of them, occupying every possible site to north and south and even up the sides of the Capitoline hill. Nothing ever was torn down in the Forum. Each Emperor added his own contribution wherever room could be found, at whatever cost to rational planning and ease of movement.

At any hour, therefore, the Forum was a noisy, turbulent place. Antipater, numbed by the fierce heat and his own despair and confusion, was jostled again and again by unthinking common citizens hurrying blindly on to the shops and marketplaces along the fringes of the great public buildings. He began to feel a little dizzy. Clammy sweat soaked his light robe and his forehead was throbbing.

I must be somewhat ill, he decided.

Then, suddenly bewildered, he staggered and lurched and it was all he could do to keep from falling to the ground. He knew that he had to pause and rest. A high-domed eight-sided temple with massive ocher walls loomed up before him. Antipater lowered himself carefully to the bottommost of its broad stone steps and huddled there with his face in his hands, surprised to find himself shivering in this great warmth. Exhaustion, he thought. Exhaustion, stress, perhaps a little touch of fever.

"Thinking of making an offering to Concordia, are you, Antipater?" a cool mocking voice from above asked him.

He looked blearily up into the dazzling glare of the midday sunlight. A long smirking angular face, fashionably pale, caked with cracking makeup, hovered before him. Shining sea-green eyes, eyes precisely the color of the Emperor's, but these were bloodshot and crazed.

Germanicus Caesar, it was, the royal heir, the profligate, sybaritic younger brother.

He had descended from a litter right in front of Antipater and stood rocking back and forth before him, grinning lopsidedly as if still drunk from the night before.

"Concordia?" Antipater asked muzzily. "Concordia?"

"The temple," Germanicus said. "The one you're sitting in front of."

"Ah," Antipater said. "Yes."

He understood. The steps on which he had taken refuge, he saw now, were those of the magnificent Temple of Concordia. There was rich irony in that. The Temple of Concordia, Antipater knew, had been a gift to the city of Roma from the celebrated Eastern Emperor Justinian, seven hundred years earlier, by way of paying homage to the spirit of fraternal harmony that existed between the two halves of the Roman Empire. And here was the Eastern Empire now, no longer so touchingly fraternal, about to invade Italia and subjugate as much of the senior Roman realm as it could manage to conquer, up to and including the city of Roma itself. So much for Concordia. So much for the harmony of the two empires.

"What's the matter with you?" Germanicus demanded. "Drunk?"

"The heat—the crowds—"

"Yes. That could make anybody sick. What are you doing walking around by yourself here, anyway?" Germanicus leaned forward. His breath, stinking

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of wine and overripe anchovies, was like a blast out of Hades. Nodding toward his litter, he said, "My chair's big enough for two. Come on: I'll give you a ride home."

That was the last thing Antipater wanted, to be cooped up with this foul-smelling lascivious prince inside a covered litter, even for the quarter of an hour it would take to cross the Forum to the Palatine. He shook his head. "No—no—"

"Well, get out of the sun, at least. Let's go into the temple. I want to talk to you, anyway."

"You do?"

Helplessly Antipater allowed himself to be tugged to his feet and herded up the dozen or more steps of Justinian's temple. Within, behind the great bronze door, all was cool and dark. The place was deserted, no priests, no worshippers. A brilliant shaft of light descending from an opening high overhead in the dome illuminated a marble slab above the altar that proclaimed, in fiery letters of gold, the Emperor Justinian's eternal love for his kinsman and royal counterpart of the West, His Imperial Roman Majesty Caesar Augustus Heraclius II.

Germanicus laughed softly. "Those two should only know what's going on now! Could it ever have worked, d'ye think—dividing the Empire and expecting the two halves to live together peacefully forever after?"

Antipater, still dizzied and faint, felt little wish to discuss history with Prince Germanicus just now.

"Perhaps, in an ideal world—" he began.

Germanicus laughed again, this time a harsh cackle. "An ideal world, yes! Very good, Antipater! Very good! But we happen to live in the real one, is that not so? And in the real world there was no way that an empire the size of the one we once had could have been maintained intact, so it had to be divided. But once the first Constantinus divided it, Antipater, war between the two halves was inevitable. The wonder of it is that it took so long to happen."

A discourse on history from the Emperor's drunken dissolute brother, here in Justinian's serene temple. How strange, Antipater thought. And was there any truth in the point Germanicus was making, Antipater wondered? The war between East and West—inevitable?

He doubted that Constantinus the Great, who had split the unwieldy Roman world in half by setting up a second capital far to the east of Roma at Byzantium on the Bosporus, ever had thought so. Beyond question Constantinus had supposed that his sons would share power peacefully, one reigning over the eastern provinces from the new capital of Constantinopolis, one in Italia and the Danubian provinces, a third in Britannia and Gallia and Hispania. Hardly was Constantinus in his grave, though, than the divided Empire was embroiled in war, with one of the sons attacking another and seizing his realm; and for sixty years after that all was in flux, until the great Emperor Theodosius had brought about the final administrative division of the Roman world, separating its Greek-speaking territories from the Latin-speaking ones.

But Theodosius hadn't accepted the inevitability of East-West war either. By his decree the two Emperors, the Eastern one and the Western one, were supposed to consider themselves colleagues, joint rulers of the entire realm, consulting each other on all high matters of state, each even having the power to name a successor for an imperial colleague that died. It didn't work out that way, of course. The two nations drifted apart, though some measure of cooperation did continue for hundreds of years. And now—the friction of the

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past half century, culminating in the present slowly escalating war of East against West—the foolish, needless, ghastly war that was about to burst in all its fury upon this greatest of all cities—

"Look at this stuff!" Germanicus cried. He had left Antipater's side to go roaming about in the deserted temple, peering at the paintings and mosaics with which Justinian's Byzantine craftsmen had bedecked the sides of the building. "I hate the Greek style, don't you? Flat and stiff and creaky—you'd think they didn't understand a damned thing about perspective. If I had been Heraclius, I'd have covered the walls over with plaster the moment Justinian's people were out of town. Too late for all that now, though." Germanicus had reached the far side, and peered up for a moment at the vast regal portrait of solemn scowling Justinian, done in gleaming golden tile, that loomed out from the belly of the dome like Jupiter himself glowering down. Then he whirled to face Antipater. "But what am I saying?" he bellowed through the echoing dimness. "You're a Greek yourself! You love this kind of art!"

"I am a Roman citizen born, sir," said Antipater quietly.

"Yes. Yes, of course. That's why you speak Greek so well, and why you look the way you do. And that hot little dark-eyed lady you spend your nights with—she's Roman too, right? Where are you from, anyway, Antipater? Alexandria? Cyprus?"

"Salona in Dalmatia, sir. Roman territory at the time."

"Salona. Yes. The palace of Diocletianus is there, isn't it? And nobody would say that Diocletianus wasn't a Roman. Why do you look so damnably Greek, though? Come over here, Antipater. Let me look at you. *Antipater.* That's a fine Roman name."

"My family was Greek originally. We were from Antioch, but that was many hundreds of years ago. If I am Greek, then Romans are Trojans, because Aeneas came from Troia to found the settlement that became Roma. And where is Troia today, if not in the territory of the Greek Emperor?"

"Oh-ho! Oh-ho! A wise man! A sophist!" Briskly Germanicus returned to Antipater's side and grasped at the front of his robe, clutching it into a tight bunch. Antipater expected a stinging slap. He lifted one hand to protect his face. "Don't cower like that," the prince said. "I won't hit you. But you're a traitor, aren't you? A Greek and a traitor. Who consorts nightly with the enemy. I'm speaking of that Greek wench of yours, the little bosomy spy. When the Basileus comes in triumph to Roma, you'll go rushing to his side and tell him you were loyal to him all along."

"No, sir. By your leave, sir, none of that is true, sir."

"Not a traitor?"

"No, sir," said Antipater desperately. "Nor is Justina a spy. We are Romans of Roma, faithful to the West. I serve your royal brother the Caesar Maximilianus and no one else."

That appeared to be effective. "Ah. Good. Good. I'll accept that. You seem sincere." Germanicus winked and released him with a light shove, and spun away to stand with his back toward Antipater. In a much less manic tone, sounding almost subdued, he said, "You stayed at the meeting after the rest of us left. Did Caesar have anything interesting to say to you?"

"Why—why—he merely—"

Antipater faltered. What kind of loyalty to Caesar would it be to betray his private conversations to another, even Caesar's own brother?

"He said nothing of significance, sir. Just a bit of recapitulation of the meeting, was all."

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"Just a bit of recapitulation."

"Yes, sir. Nothing more."

"I wonder. You're very thick with him, Antipater. He trusts you, you know, shifty little Greek that you are. Emperors always trust their secretaries more than they do anybody else. It doesn't matter to him that you're a Greek. He tells you things that he doesn't tell others." Germanicus swung round again. The sea-green eyes drilled with sudden ferocity into Antipater's. "I wonder," he said again. "Was he speaking the truth, when he said that we don't need to do anything about this fleet off Sardinia? Does he actually and truly believe that?"

Antipater felt his cheeks growing hot. He was grateful for the faintness of the light in here, and for his own swarthy skin, that would hide his embarrassment from the prince. It seemed odd to him that the famously idle Germanicus, who had never to Antipater's knowledge demonstrated a shred of interest in public affairs, should be so concerned now with his imperial brother's military intentions. But perhaps the imminence of a Greek invasion of the capital had aroused even this roguish, lackadaisical, irresponsible lordling to some alarm. Or, perhaps, all this was just some passing whim of his. No matter which, Antipater could not evade a reply this time.

Carefully he said, "I would not presume to tell anyone what I imagined the Emperor was thinking, sir. My understanding of his position, though, is that he sees that there's very little we can really do against the Basileus—that we are hemmed in on two sides already and that we are unable to protect ourselves against an attack on some new front."

"He's absolutely right," said Germanicus. "Our goose, as the Britannians say, is cooked. The question is what kind of sauce will go on the dish, eh? Eh, Antipater?" And then, abruptly, Antipater found himself being seized once again and swept forward into a hard, crushing embrace. Germanicus's bristly cheek rubbed across his with stinging force. The reek of the young prince brought a new surge of dizziness to him. He is crazy, Antipater thought. *Crazy.* "Ah, Antipater, Antipater, you know I mean you no harm! I do love you, man, for your devotion to my brother. Poor Maximilianus! What a burden it must be to him to be Emperor at a time like this!" Letting go of Antipater once more, he stepped back and said, in yet another new tone of voice, somber now and oddly earnest, "You will not speak a word of this meeting to my brother, will you, eh? I think I've disturbed your tranquility, and I wouldn't want him thinking ill of me for that. He's terribly fond of you. He relies on you so very much. —Come, Antipater, will you let me take you home, now? That hot little Greek of yours very likely has a sizzling noontime surprise for you, and it would be rude to keep her waiting."

He said nothing to Justina of his strange encounter with the Emperor's brother. But the episode stayed in his mind.

Beyond much doubt the prince was mad. And yet, yet, there had seemed to be some undertone of seriousness in his discourse—a side of Germanicus Caesar that Antipater had never seen before, nor, perhaps, anyone else either.

Germanicus's belief that the original Empire, the one that had spanned the world from Britannia to the borders of India, had been too large to govern from a single capital—well, yes, nobody would dispute that issue. Even in Diocletianus's time the job had been so big that several Emperors reigning jointly had been needed to handle it, not that that had worked particularly

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well; and a generation later the great Constantinus had found governing the entire thing impossible even for him. And so had come the formal division of the realm, which under Theodosius had become permanent.

But what about the other point, the inevitability of war between East and West?

Antipater had no love for that line of thinking. Yet he knew that the historical record provided strong support for it. Even in the era of supposed East-West concord, when Justinian reigned in Constantinopolis and his cousin Heraclius in Roma, great trade rivalries had sprung up, each Empire trying to outflank the other, Latin Romans reaching out around Byzantium toward remote India and even more remote Khitai and Cipangu where the yellow-faced men live, and Greek Romans seeking influence to the south in black Africa and to the far frozen northern territories that lay behind the homeland of the half-savage Goths.

That had all been sorted out by treaty; perhaps, thought Antipater, Justinian's temple in Roma had been erected in commemoration of some such agreement. But the frictions had continued, the jockeying for prime position in the world's commerce.

And then, beginning seventy or eighty years ago, the West's big mistake, the colossally foolish expedition to the New World—what a calamity that had been! Certainly it was exciting to discover that two great continents lay beyond the Ocean Sea, and that mighty nations—Mexico, Peru—existed there, strange lands rich in gold and silver and precious stones, inhabited by multitudes of copper-skinned people ruled by lordly monarchs who lived in pomp and opulence worthy of Caesar himself. But what lunacy had possessed the megalomaniac Emperor Saturninus to try to *conquer* those nations, instead of simply to enter into trade relations with them? Decades of futile overseas expeditions—millions of sesterces wasted, whole legions sent out by one obstinate Emperor after another to die under the searing sun of the inhospitable continents that Saturninus had optimistically named Nova Roma—the pride of the Western Empire's military destroyed by the spears and arrows of unstoppable torrents of demonic wild-eyed warriors with painted faces—hundreds of ships lost in those perilous alien waters—the spirit of the Empire broken by the unfamiliar experience of defeat after defeat, and the ultimate grim capitulation and evacuation of the final batch of shattered Roman troops—

That ill-advised adventure had, as Antipater and everyone else recognized now, drained the economic resources of the Western Empire in a terrible way, and, perhaps, weakened its military power beyond repair. Two entire generations of the most gifted generals and admirals had perished on the shores of Nova Roma. And then, the idiotically arrogant Emperor Julian IV compounding the error by evicting a Greek mercantile mission from the island of Melita, a trifling dot in the sea between Sicilia and the African coast that both Empires long had laid claim to. To which Leo IX of Byzantium had retaliated not only by landing troops on Melita and taking control of it, but by unilaterally redrawing the ancient dividing line of the two empires that ran through the province of Illyricum, so that the Dalmatian coast, with its valuable ports on the Adriatic Sea, now came under Byzantine rule.

That was the beginning of the end. The Western Empire, already badly overextended by its doomed project in the New World, could not resist the takeover with any real force. Which had encouraged Leo and his successors in the East, first Constantinus XI and then Andronicus, to reach deeper and

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deeper into Western territory, until by now the capital itself was in jeopardy and the West seemed certain to fall into Byzantine control for the first time in history.

Still, Antipater wondered whether it all had been, as Germanicus maintained, inevitable from the start.

Rivalry, yes. Friction and occasional outright conflict, yes. But the conquest of one Empire by the other? There was nothing in the divided-Empire schemes of Constantinus and Theodosius that had made it obligatory for the West to undertake a stupid and ruinous overseas campaign, one which no Caesar would abandon until the Empire had crippled itself. Nor anything requiring the crippled Empire to have wantonly given its eastern rival provocation for attacking it, on top of the previous folly. Under wiser Emperors, Roma would have remained Roma for all eternity. But now—

"You brood too much," Justina told him.

"There's much to brood about."

"The war? I tell you again, Antipater: we need to flee before it gets here."

"And I answer you again: go where?"

"Some place where no fighting is going to happen. Some place far to the east, where the sun is always bright and the weather is warm. Syria or Aiguptos. Cyprus, maybe."

"Greek places, all of them. I'm a Roman. They'll say I'm a spy."

Justina laughed indelicately. "We don't fit in anywhere, is what you say! The Romans think you're a Greek. Now you don't want to fly to the East because they'll say you're a Roman. How will they be able to tell, anyway? You look and sound as Greek as I do."

Antipater stared at her gloomily. "The truth is, Justina, we *don't* fit in anywhere. Not really. But the main point, completely aside from whatever I may look and sound like, is that I'm an official of the Western imperial court. I've signed my name to endless pieces of diplomatic correspondence that are on file in Constantinopolis."

"Who's to know? Who would care? The Western Empire is a dead thing. We escape to Cyprus; we raise sheep, we grow some grapes; you earn some money, perhaps, by working as a Latin translator. You tell people you lived for a time in the West, if anybody wonders where you came from. What of it? Nobody will accuse you of being a spy for the Western Empire when the Western Empire doesn't exist any more."

"But it still does exist," he said.

"Only for the time being," said Justina.

He had to admit that the idea was tempting. He was being overly apprehensive, perhaps, in thinking that anyone would hold his service under Maximilianus Caesar against him if he ran away to the East. No one would care a fig for that, back there in the sunny, sleepy, sea-girt lands of the Greek world. He and Justina could start new lives together.

But still—still—

He didn't see how he could desert his post while the government of Maximilianus was still intact. That seemed a vile deed to him. Unmanly. Treacherous. *Greek.* He was a Roman; he would stay at his post until the end came. And then—

Well, who knew what would happen then?

"I can't leave," he told Justina. "Not now."

The days passed. The bright skies of early autumn gave way to gray, drea-

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ry ones that betokened the oncoming rainy season. Justina said little to him about the political situation, now. She said little about anything. The Roman winter was a difficult time for her. She had lived nearly all her life in the Western Empire, yes, but she was Greek to the core, a child of the south, of the sun. A life down in Neapolis or, even better, Sicilia, might have been warm and bright enough for her, but not Roma, where the winters were wet and chilly. Antipater often wondered, as he made his way homeward from his duties at the palace under the darkening skies, whether he would discover, some afternoon, that she had packed up and vanished. Already it was possible to detect signs that a small abandonment of the capital might be getting under way: the crowds in the streets seemed more sparse, and every day he noticed another shop or two closed and boarded up. But Justina remained by his side.

His palace duties became more pointless day by day. No more ultimatums went forth to the Basileus Andronicus. What was the use? The end was in sight. Antipater's work consisted now mainly in translating the reports that came in from the spies that Caesar still had posted all around the perimeter of the Greek world. Troop movements in Dalmatia—reinforcements of the already huge Greek army sitting up there opposite the northeastern end of the peninsula within striking distance of the Roman outpost at Venetia. Another Greek army on the march down in Africa, heading westward along the shore from Aiguptos toward Carthago and the other ports of the Numidian coast: backup forces, no doubt, for the troops already in Sicilia. And still other shuffings about of the apparently infinite Byzantine military power were going on to the north: a legion of Turks supposedly being sent up into Sarmatia, along the German border, presumably for the purpose of stretching the already thin Roman lines of defense even further.

Punctiliously Antipater read all these dispatches to the Emperor, but Maximilianus only occasionally seemed to pay attention. The Emperor was moody, remote, distracted. One day Antipater entered the Emerald Office and found him poring over a huge book of history, open to the page that bore the long list of past Caesars. He was running his finger down the list from the beginning, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and onward through Hadrianus, Marcus Aurelius, Septimus Severus, into the time of the division of the realm, and beyond that to medieval times and the modern era. The list, just the Western Emperors now, stretched on and on beyond his pointing finger, scores of names great and small, Clodianus, Claudius Titianus, Titus Gallius, all the Heracliuses, all the Constantinuses, all the Marcianuses.

Antipater watched as Maximilianus drew his quivering fingertip down into recent time: Trajan VI, Julian IV, Philippus V, and Maximilianus's own father, Maximilianus V. There the list had originally stopped. It had been compiled before the commencement of the present reign. But someone had written in at the bottom, in a different hand, the name of Maximilianus VI. Maximilianus's finger, tracing its way downward, halted there. His own name. He began slowly to shake his head from side to side. Antipater understood at once what was passing through the Emperor's mind. Staring at that great list, encompassing it from top to bottom, he was recapitulating all the long flow of the river of Roman time, from the Empire's grand inauguration under the immortal Augustus to . . . its end . . . its *end* . . . under the inconsequential, insignificant Maximilianus VI.

He closed the book, and looked up at Antipater, and smiled a bleak, chilly little smile. Antipater had no difficulty in reading the Emperor's thoughts.

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The last of all that great list! What a distinction, Antipater! What an extraordinary distinction!

That night Antipater dreamed of wild-eyed drunken Greek soldiers in bulky blue-green linen jerkins running jubilantly through the streets of Roma, laughing and shouting, looting stores, pulling women into alleyways. And then the Emperor Andronicus riding in glory down the Via Flaminia into the city, resplendent in his purple *chlamys,* his robe of authority, with his great mane of golden hair flowing behind him and his enormous yellow beard tumbling over his chest. Throngs of Roman citizens lined the great highway to pelt him with flower-petals and cheer him on, crying out enthusiastically in praise of their new master, hailing him in his own language, calling him *Basileus Romaion,* "King of the Romans." Spurning the use of a chariot, the conquering monarch sat astride a colossal white horse bedecked with jewels; he wore the shining Greek crown crested with peacock-feathers and carried in one hand the eagle-headed scepter of rule, and with the other he waved magnanimously to the crowds. And went on toward the Forum, where he dismounted and looked around in satisfaction. And, sauntering on into the avenue running below the Capitoline hill, paused there and gestured to a member of his entourage with a broad sweeping movement of his hand, as though to indicate where he intended to erect the triumphal arch marking his victory.

The next day—a day of endless pelting driving rain—a messenger arrived at the palace bearing word that Greek forces had landed on the Ligurian shore. The ports of Antipolis and Nicaea had fallen to them without a battle, and the Greeks were presently en route along the coastal highway toward the city of Genua. In the afternoon came a second runner, half dead on his feet, who carried news from the south that a tremendous military engagement was under way in Calabria, where the Roman army was hard pressed and slowly retreating, while a second Greek force out of Sicilia had unexpectedly landed farther up the peninsula, had captured the harbor of Neapolis, and was laying siege to that essential southern city, whose fall was imminent.

The only piece missing, thought Antipater, was an attack on the northeastern frontier by the Byzantine forces in Dalmatia. "Perhaps we'll get news of that invasion too, before long," he said to Justina. "But it hardly matters, does it?" The soldiers of Andronicus were already moving through the Italian peninsula toward Roma both from the north and the south. "The goose is cooked, as Germanicus would say. The game is lost. The Empire's finished."

"You will take a letter to the Basileus Andronicus," said the Emperor.

They were in the little Indigo Office, next door to the Emerald one. In dank, rainy weather it was a little warmer there than in the Emerald. This was the fourth day of rain, now. Neapolis had fallen, and the Greek army of the south, having polished off most of the southern Roman garrison, was moving steadily up the Via Roma toward the capital. The only difficulties it was encountering were from mudslides blocking the roads. The second Greek force, the one coming down from Liguria, was somewhere in Latium, it seemed, perhaps as far south as Tarquinii or Caere. Apparently it, too, was meeting no resistance other than from the weather. Caere was just thirty miles north of Rome. There had also been a Byzantine breakthrough on the Venetian front out of Dalmatia.

Maximilianus cleared his throat. "To His Royal Splendor Andronicus Maniakes, Autocrat and Imperator, by the grace of God King of Kings, King of

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the Romans and Supreme Master of All Regions'—you have all that, Antipater?—"

"'*Basileus basileion,*'" Antipater murmured. "Yes, majesty." He gave Maximilianus a carefully measured glance. "Did you say 'Supreme Master of All Regions'?"

"So he styles himself, yes," said Maximilianus, a little irritably.

"But, begging your pardon, the implication, sire—"

"Let us just continue, Antipater. 'And Supreme Master of All Regions. From his cousin Maximilianus Julianus Philippus Romanus Caesar Augustus, Imperator and Grand Pontifex, Tribune of the People, et cetera, et cetera'—you know all the titles, Antipater; put them in—'Greetings, and may the benevolence of all the gods be upon you forever and ever, world without end.'" Again the Emperor paused. He took two or three deep breaths. "'Whereas it has been the pleasure of the gods to permit me to occupy the throne of the Caesars these past twenty years, it has lately begun to seem to me that the favor of heaven has been withdrawn from me, and that it is the will of the most divine gods that I lay down the responsibilities that were placed upon me long ago by the command of my royal father, His Most Excellent Majesty the Divine Imperator Maximilianus Julianus Philippus Claudius Caesar Augustus. Likewise it is evident to me that the favor of heaven has fallen upon my imperial cousin His Most Puissant Majesty the Basileus Andronicus Maniakes, Autocrat and Imperator, et cetera, et cetera,'—give his full titles all over again, will you, Antipater?—"

Antipater was on to his second wax tablet by this time, and he had scarcely written down anything but strings of royal titles. But the sense of the message was already quite clear. He felt his heart beginning to thump as the meaning of what the Emperor was dictating to him sank in.

It was a document of abdication.

Maximilianus was handing the Empire over to the Greeks.

Well, of course, the Greeks had grabbed the Empire already, essentially, everything but the capital itself and a few miserable miles of territory surrounding it. But still, was this proper Roman behavior? There was hardly any precedent for the capitulation of a Roman Emperor to a foreign conqueror, and that was what Andronicus was, a Greek, a foreigner, whatever pretense the Byzantines might make toward being a legitimate half of the original Roman Empire. Rulers had been deposed before, yes. There had been civil wars in ancient times, Octavianus versus Marcus Antonius, and the squabble over the succession to Nero, and the battle for the throne after the assassination of Commodus. But Antipater couldn't recall any instances of a defeated Emperor supinely resigning the throne to his conqueror. The usual thing was to fall on your sword, wasn't it, as the troops of the victorious rival drew near? But what had been usual a thousand years ago might no longer be considered appropriate behavior, Antipater decided.

And Maximilianus was still speaking in a steady flow, every sentence constructed with a careful sense of style and precise in its grammar, as though he had begun drafting this letter many weeks back, revising it again and again in his mind until it was perfect, and nothing remained now but for him to express it aloud so that Antipater could render it into Byzantine Greek.

Definitely, a document of abdication. To Antipater's astonishment, Maximilianus was indeed not merely giving up his throne, he was designating Andronicus as his legally valid successor, the true and lawful wielder of the imperial power.

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There was, of course, the problem that Maximilianus had not managed to produce any children, and the official heir to the throne, Germanicus, was hardly suitable for the job. But Maximilianus was basically handing Andronicus clear title to the crown, not just by right of conquest but by the explicit decree of the outgoing monarch. In effect he was reuniting the two halves of the ancient Empire. Was it really necessary for him to carry the thing so far? If he didn't plan to kill himself, Antipater thought, and who could blame him for that, couldn't he simply acknowledge his defeat with a curt letter of surrender and go off into history with a certain degree of dignity intact?

But Maximilianus was still speaking, and suddenly Antipater realized that there was another, and deeper, purpose to this document.

"'I have grown old in office'"—not true; he was hardly more than fifty—"'and the burden of power wearies me, and I seek only now to live a quiet life of reading and meditation in some corner of Your Imperial Majesty's immense domain. I cite the precedent of the Caesar Diocletianus of old, who, after having reigned exactly twenty years, as I have, voluntarily yielded up his tremendous powers and took up residence in the province of Dalmatia, in the city of Salona, where the palace of his retirement stands to this day. It is the humble request of Maximilianus Caesar, my lord, that I be permitted to follow the path of Diocletianus, and, in fact, if it should be pleasing to you, that I even be allowed to occupy the palace at Salona, where I spent a number of nights during the years of my reign, and which is to me an agreeable residence to which I could gladly retire now—'"

Antipater knew the palace at Salona well. He had grown up virtually in its shadow. It was quite a decent sort of palace, practically a small town in itself, right on the sea, with enormous fortified walls and, no doubt, the most luxurious accommodations within. Many a Caesar had used it as a guest house while visiting the lovely Dalmatian coast. Perhaps Andronicus had stayed in it himself, inasmuch as Dalmatia had been under Byzantine control the past few decades.

And here was Maximilanus asking for it—no, *begging* for it, the fallen Emperor making a "humble request," addressing Andronicus suddenly as "my lord," using a phrase like "if it should be pleasing to you." Turning over legal title to the Empire to Andronicus on a silver platter, asking nothing more in return than to be allowed to go off and hide himself behind the gigantic walls of Diocletianus's retirement home for the rest of his life.

Dishonorable. Disgraceful. Disgusting.

Antipater looked hastily away. He did not dare let Caesar see the blaze of contempt that had come into his eyes.

The Emperor was still speaking. Antipater had missed a few words, but what did that matter? He could always fill in with something appropriate.

"'—I remain, I assure you, dear cousin Andronicus, yours in the deepest gratitude, offering herewith the highest regard for your wisdom and benevolence and my heartfelt felicitations on all the glorious achievements of your reign—cordially, Maximilianus Julianus Philippus Romanus Caesar Augustus, Imperator and Grand Pontifex, et cetera, et cetera—'"

"Well," Justina said, when Antipater summarized the abdication document for her the next evening after he had spent much of yet another rainy day copying it out prettily on a parchment scroll, "Andronicus doesn't have to give Maximilianus anything, does he? He can simply cut his head off, if he likes."

"He won't do that. This is the year 1951. The Byzantines are civilized folk.

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Andronicus doesn't want to look like a barbarian. Besides, it's bad politics. Why make a martyr out of Maximilianus, and set him up as a hero for whatever anti-Greek resistance movement is likely to come into being in the rougher provinces of the West, when he can simply give him a kiss on the cheek and pack him off to Salona? The whole Western Empire's his, regardless. He might just as well make a peaceful start to his reign here."

"So Andronicus will accept the deal, do you think?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course. If he has any sense at all."

"And then?"

"Then?"

"Us," said Justina. "What of us?"

"Oh. Yes. Yes. The Emperor had a few things to say about that, too."

Justina drew her breath in sharply. "He did?"

Uneasily Antipater said, "When he was finished dictating the letter, he turned to me and asked me if I would come with him to Salona, or wherever else Andronicus allowed him to go. 'I'll still need a secretary, even in retirement,' he said. 'Especially if I wind up in the Greek-speaking part of the Empire, and that's surely where Andronicus will want to put me, so that he can keep me under his thumb. Marry your little Greek and come along with me, Antipater.' That's exactly what he said. 'Marry your little Greek. Come along with me.'"

Instantly Justina's eyes were glowing. Her face was flushed, her breasts were rising and falling quickly. "Oh, Antipater! How wonderful! You accepted, naturally!"

In fact he had not, not exactly. Not at all, as a matter of fact. Nor had he refused, exactly, either. Not at all. He had given Caesar no real answer of any sort.

In some discomfort he said, "You know that I'd be delighted to marry you, Justina."

She looked perplexed. "And the part about following Caesar to Dalmatia?"

"Well—" he said. "I suppose—"

"You *suppose?* What other choice do we have?"

Antipater hesitated, fumbling in the air with his outspread hands. "How can I say this, Justina? But let me try. What Caesar is asking is, well—cowardly. Shameful. Un-Roman."

"Perhaps so. And if it is, so what? Better to stay here and die like a Roman, do you think?"

"I've already told you, Andronicus would never put him to death."

"I'm talking about us."

"Why would anyone harm *us,* Justina?"

"We've been through all this. As you yourself pointed out last week, you're an official of the court. I'm a Greek citizen who's been consorting with Romans. Surely there'd be a purge of the old bureaucracy. You wouldn't be executed, I guess, but you'd certainly be given a hard time. So would I. A worse time than you, I'd think. You'd be reassigned to some grubby menial job, maybe. But they'd find some very nasty uses for someone like me. Conquering soldiers always do."

It was hard for him to meet the implacable fury of her eyes.

All yesterday afternoon since he taken his leave of Caesar in the Indigo Office, and most of today as well, his head had been swirling with ringing heroic phrases—*in the end, one must comport oneself as a Roman must, or be seen to be nothing at all—our great heroic traditions demand—history will never*

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forgive—a time comes when a man must proclaim himself to be a man, or else he is nothing more than—how shameful, how unutterably and eternally shameful, it would be to affiliate myself with the court of so despicable a coward, an Emperor who—And much more in the same vein, all leading up to his grand repudiation of the invitation to accompany Maximilianus into a cozy Dalmatian retirement. But now he saw only too clearly that all that was so much nonsense.

Our great heroic traditions demand, do they? Perhaps so. But Maximilianus Caesar was no hero, and neither was Lucius Aelius Antipater. And if the Emperor himself could not bring himself to behave like a Roman, why should his Master of Greek Letters? A man who was no sort of warrior, only a clerk, a man of books, and not all that much of a Roman, either, not so that Cicero or Seneca or Cato the Censor would have believed. They would have laughed at his pretensions. You, a Roman? You with your oily Greek hair and your little snub nose and your ballet-dancer way of walking? Anybody can *call* himself a Roman, but only a Roman can *be* a Roman.

The time of Seneca and Cato and Cicero was long over, anyway. Things were different today. The enemy was at the gates of Roma, and what was the Emperor doing? Serenely falling on his sword? Calmly slitting his wrists? No. No. Why, the Emperor was busy composing a letter that pleaded abjectly for a soft safe withdrawal to a big palace on the Dalmatian coast. Was the Master of Greek Letters supposed to stand at the bridge facing the foe with a blade in each hand like some indomitable hero of old, while the Emperor he served was blithely running out of town the back way?

"Look," Justina said. She had gone to the window. "Bonfires out there. A big one on the Capitoline Hill, I think."

"We can't see the Capitoline from that window."

"Well, some other hill, then. Three, four, five bonfires on the hills out there. And look down there, in the Forum. Torches all along the Sacra Via. The whole city's lit up. —I think they're here, Antipater."

He peered out. The rain had stopped, and torches and bonfires indeed were blazing everywhere. He heard distant shouts in the night, but was unable to make out any words. Everything was vague, blurry, mysterious.

"Well?" Justina asked.

He let his tongue slide back and forth across his upper lip a couple of times. "I think they're here, yes."

"And now? It's too late for us to run, isn't it? So we stand our ground and await our fates, you and I and the Emperor Maximilianus, like the stoic Romans that we are. Isn't that so, Antipater?"

"Andronicus won't harm the Emperor. No harm will come to you or me, either."

"We'll find that out soon enough, won't we?" said Justina.

The next day was a day like none before it in the long history of Roma. The Greeks had come in the night before just as darkness was falling, thousands of them, entering through four of the city's gates at once; and they had met with no opposition whatever. Evidently the Emperor had sent out word to the commanders of the home guard that no attempts at resistance were to be made, for they surely would be futile and would only lead to great loss of life and widespread destruction within the city. The war was lost, said the Emperor; let the Greeks come in without prolonging the agony. Which was either a wise and realistic attitude, thought Antipater, or else a despicably

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fainthearted one, and he knew what he believed. But he kept his opinions to himself.

The rain, which had halted for most of the night on the evening of the conquest, returned in the morning, just as the Basileus Andronicus was making his triumphal entrance into the city from the north, along the Via Flaminia. The scene was almost as Antipater had seen it in his dream, except that the weather was bad, and there were no flower-petals being thrown, and the people lining the road looked stunned rather than jubilant and no one hailed the new Emperor in Greek. But Andronicus did ride a huge white horse and looked rather splendid, even in the rain with his great mass of golden hair pasted together in strings and his beard a soggy mop. He went not to the Forum, as Antipater had dreamed he would, but straight to the imperial palace, where, the conqueror had been told, he would be presented with the document of abdication that the Emperor had dictated to Antipater the previous day.

The entire Great Council was present at the ceremony. It took place in the glittering Hall of the Hunting Mosaics, built by one of the later Heracliuses, where the Emperor usually received delegations from distant lands under showy depictions in glowing red and green and purple tiles of the spearing of lions and elephants by valiant men in ancient Roman costume. Today, though, instead of seating himself on the throne, Maximilianus stood meekly at the left side of it, facing the Byzantine monarch, who stood just opposite him at a distance of some eight or ten paces. Behind Maximilianus were arrayed the members of the Council; behind Andronicus, half a dozen Greek officials who had traveled with him in the parade down the Via Flaminia.

The contrast between the two monarchs was instructive. The Emperor seemed dwarfed beside Andronicus, a giant of a man, by far the tallest and burliest in the room, who had thick heavy features and the coarse unruly yellow hair of a Celt or a Briton tumbling far down his back. Everything about him, his broad shoulders, his massive chest, his long drooping mustaches, his jutting jaw and vast beard, radiated a sense of bull-like, almost brutish, strength. But there was a look of cold intelligence in his small piercing gray-violet eyes.

Antipater, standing at Maximilianus's side, served as interpreter. At a nod from the Emperor he handed the scroll to some high magistrate of Andronicus's court, a man with a tonsured head and a richly brocaded robe inset with what looked like real rubies and emeralds; and the magistrate, giving it only the merest glance, solemnly rolled it up and passed it on to the Basileus. Andronicus unrolled it, briskly ran his eyes along the first two or three lines in a nonchalantly cursory way, and let it roll closed again. He handed it back to the tonsured magistrate.

"What does this thing say?" he asked Antipater brusquely.

Antipater found himself wondering whether the King of the Romans could be unable to read. With some astonishment he heard himself reply, "It is a document of abdication, your majesty."

"Give it here again," said Andronicus. His voice was deep and hard and rough-edged, and his Greek was not in the least mellifluous: more a soldier's kind of Greek, or even a farmer's kind of Greek, than a king's. An affectation, most likely. Andronicus came from one of the great old Byzantine families. You would never know it, though.

With a grandiose gesture the tonsured magistrate returned the scroll to the Basileus, who once more made a show of unrolling it, and again seeming-

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ly reading a little, another line or two, and then closing it a second time and casually tucking it under his arm.

The room was very quiet.

Antipater, uncomfortably conscious of his place much too close to the center of the scene, glanced about him at the two Consuls, the assembled Ministers and Secretaries, the great generals and admirals, the Praetorian Prefect, the Keeper of the Imperial Treasury. Unlike the Emperor Maximilianus, who bore himself now with no sign whatever of self-importance, a small man who knew he was about to be diminished even further, they were all holding themselves bolt upright, standing with ferocious military rigidity. Did any of them realize what was in the letter? Probably not. Not the Salona part, anyway. Antipater's eye met that of Crown Prince Germanicus, who looked remarkably fresh for the occasion, newly bathed and spotless in a brilliant white robe edged with purple. Germanicus too had adopted today's general posture of martial erectness, which seemed notably inappropriate on him. But he seemed almost to be smiling. What, Antipater wondered, could there be to smile about on this terrible day?

To Antipater the Basileus Andronicus said, "The Emperor resigns his powers unconditionally, does he not?"

"He does, your majesty."

From members of the Great Council here and there around the room came little gasping sounds, more of shock than surprise. They could not be surprised, surely, Antipater thought. But the blunt acknowledgment of the reality of the situation had an unavoidable impact even so.

Prince Germanicus's demeanor did not change, though: the same lofty stance, the same calm, cool half-smile at the corner of his lips. His elder brother had just signed away for all time the throne that Germanicus might one day have inherited; but had Germanicus ever really expected to occupy that throne, anyway?

Andronicus said, "And are there any special requests?"

"Only one, majesty."

"And that is?"

All eyes were on Antipater. He wished he could sink into the gleaming stone floor. Why was it necessary for *him* to be the one to speak the damning words out loud before the great men of Roma?

But there was no escaping it. "Caesar Maximilianus requests, sire," said Antipater in the steadiest voice he could muster, "that he be permitted to withdraw with such members of his court as may care to accompany him to the palace of the Emperor Diocletianus in Salona in the province of Dalmatia, where he hopes to spend the rest of his days in contemplation and study."

There. Done. Antipater stared into the air before him, looking at nothing.

The small, hard, gray-violet eyes of the Basileus flickered shut for half an instant; and something like a scornful smirk was visible just as briefly at a corner of the Byzantine Emperor's mouth. "We see no reason why the request cannot be granted," he said, after a time. "We accept the terms of the document as proposed." Yet again he unrolled it; and, taking a pen from the magistrate beside him, he scrawled a huge capital *A* at the bottom. His signature, evidently. "Is there anything else?"

"No, your majesty."

Andronicus nodded. "Well, then. Inform the former Emperor that it is our pleasure to spend this night in our camp beside the river, among our men. Tomorrow we intend to take up residence in this palace, from which nothing

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is to be removed without our permission. Tomorrow, also, we will present to you our brother Romanos Caesar Stravospondylos, who is to reign over the Western Empire as its Emperor thenceforth. Tell all this to the former Emperor, if you will." He beckoned to his men, and they strode in a stiff phalanx from the room.

Antipater turned toward Maximilianus, who stood completely still, like a man transformed into a stone statue of himself.

"The Basileus says, Caesar, that he—"

"I understood what the Basileus said, thank you, Antipater," said Maximilianus, in a voice that seemed to come from the tomb. He smiled. It was a death's-head smile, the merest quick flashing of his teeth. Then he, too, went from the room. The members of the Great Council, most of them looking dazed and disbelieving, followed him in twos and threes.

So this is how empires fall in the modern era, Antipater thought.

No bloodshed, no executions. A parchment scroll passing back and forth a couple of times from conqueror to conquered, a scrawled letter A, a change of occupants for the royal apartments. And so it will go down in history. *Lucius Aelius Antipater, the defeated Emperor's Master of Greek Letters, presented the statement of abdication to the Basileus Andronicus, who gave it the most perfunctory of glances and then—*

"Antipater?"

It was Germanicus Caesar. He alone remained in the great room with the Master of Greek Letters.

The prince beckoned to him. "A word with you on the portico, Antipater. Now."

Outside, strolling together down the long enclosed porch that ran along this wing of the palace, with the rain clattering on the wooden roof overhead, Germanicus said, "What can you tell me about this Romanos Caesar, Antipater? I thought the Basileus's brother was named Alexandros."

There was something strange about his voice. Antipater realized after a moment that the prince's indolent drawl was gone. His tone was crisp, businesslike, curt.

"There are several brothers, I believe. Alexandros is the best-known one. A warrior like his brother, is Alexandros. Romanos is very likely of a different sort. The name *'Stravospondylos'* means 'crook-back.'"

Germanicus's eyes widened. "Andronicus has picked a *cripple* to be Emperor of the West?"

"It would seem so from the name, sir."

"Well. His little joke. So be it, I suppose." He smiled, but he did not look amused. "One thing's clear, anyway: there'll still be two Emperors. Andronicus isn't going to try to rule the whole united Empire from Constantinopolis, because it can't be done. Which is what I told you, Antipater, in the Forum that day, at the Temple of Concordia."

Antipater found himself still amazed by the abrupt change in Germanicus, this new seriousness of his, this no-nonsense manner. Even his posture was different. Gone was the easy aristocratic slouch, the loose-limbed ease. Suddenly he was holding himself like a soldier. Antipater had not noticed before how much taller than the Emperor Germanicus was.

"How long," Germanicus asked, "do you imagine that this Western Greek Empire will last, Antipater?"

"Sir?

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"How long? Five years? Ten? A thousand?"

"I have no way of knowing, sir."

"Give it some thought. Andronicus marches west, knocks over our pitiful defenses with two flicks of his fingers, sets up his deformed little brother as our Emperor, and goes back to the good life in Constantinopolis. Leaving a dozen or so legions of Greek troops to occupy the entire immensity of the Western Empire: Hispania, Germania, Britannia, Gallia, Belgica, on and on and on, not to mention Italia itself. For what purpose has he conquered us? Why, so our taxes will flow eastward and wind up in the Byzantine treasury. Are the farmers of Britannia going to be happy about that? Are the wild whiskery men up there in Germania? You know the answer. Andronicus has captured Roma, but that doesn't mean he's gained control of the whole Empire. They don't want Greeks running things, out there in the provinces. They won't put up with it. They're Romans, those people, and they want to be ruled by Romans. Sooner or later there'll be active resistance movements flourishing all over the place, and I say it'll be sooner rather than later. The assassination of Greek tax collectors and magistrates and municipal procurators. Local rebellions. Eventually, wide-scale uprisings. Andronicus will decide that it's not worthwhile, trying to maintain supply lines over such long distances. He'll simply shrug and let the West slide. He's not going to come out here twice in one lifetime to fight with us. Either we'll kill all the Greek occupiers, or, more likely, we'll simply swallow them up and turn them into Romans. Two or three generations in the West and they won't remember how to speak Greek."

"I daresay you're right, sir."

"I daresay I am. —I'll be leaving Roma tomorrow evening, Antipater."

"Going to Dalmatia, are you? With the Emp—with your brother?"

Germanicus spat. "Don't be a fool. No, I'm going the other way." He leaned close to Antipater and said, in a low, hard-edged voice, "There's a ship waiting at Ostia to take me to Massalia in Gallia. I'll make my capital there or at Lugdunum, I'm not yet sure which."

"Your—capital?"

"The Emperor has abdicated. You wrote the document yourself, didn't you? So I'm Emperor now, Antipater. Emperor-in-exile, maybe, but Emperor nonetheless. I'll proclaim myself formally the moment I land in Massalia."

If Germanicus had said that a week ago, Antipater thought, it would have sounded like madness, or drunken folly, or some derisive joke. But this was a different Germanicus.

The prince's sea-green eyes bore down on him mercilessly. "You're a dead man if you say a word of this to anyone before I'm gone from Roma, of course."

"Why tell me in the first place, then?"

"Because I think that in your weird shifty Greek way you're a trustworthy man, Antipater. I told you that at the Temple of Concordia, too. —I want you to come with me to Gallia."

The calmly spoken sentence struck Antipater like a thunderbolt.

"What, sir?"

"I need a Master of Greek Letters, too. Someone to help me communicate with the temporary occupying authorities in Roma. Someone to decipher the documents that my spies in the East will be sending me. And I want you as an advisor, too, Antipater. You're a timid little man, but you're smart, and shrewd as well, and you're a Greek and a Roman both at the same time. I can

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use you in Gallia. Come with me. You won't regret it. I'll rebuild the army and push the Greeks out of Roma within your lifetime and mine. You can be a Consul, Antipater, when I come back here to take possession of the throne of the Caesars."

"Sir—sir—"

"Think about it. You have until tomorrow."

Justina's expression was entirely unreadable as Antipater finished telling the tale. Whatever was going on behind those dark glistening eyes was something he could not guess at all.

"It surprised me more than I can tell you," he said, "to find out how much deeper a man Germanicus is than anybody knew. How strong he really is, despite that foppish attitude he found it useful to affect. How truly Roman, at the core."

"Yes," she said. "It must have been quite a surprise."

"It's a noble romantic idea, I have to admit, this business of proclaiming himself Emperor-in-exile and leading a resistance movement from Gallia. And his invitation to be part of his government, I confess, was very flattering. —But of course I couldn't possibly go with him." He would not go, Antipater knew, because Justina surely would not; and if one thing was clear in his mind just now amid all the chaos of the suddenly whirling world, it was that wherever Justina wanted to go, that was where they would go. She was more important to him than politics, than empires, than all such abstract things. He understood that now as never before: for him it all came down to Justina and Lucius, Lucius and Justina, and let other men fret over the burdens of empire.

"Will he succeed, do you think, in overthrowing the Greeks?" she asked.

"He stands a good chance," said Antipater. "Everyone knows that the Empire's too big to be governed from one capital off in the East, and appointing a Greek Emperor for the West won't work for long either. The West is Roman. It thinks Roman. For the time being the Greeks have the advantage over us, because we weakened ourselves so much through our own imbecility in the past fifty years that they were able to come in and take us over, but it won't last. We'll recover from what's just happened to us, and we'll return to being what we once were." He had a sudden vivid sense of the river of time flowing in two directions at once, the past returning even as it departed. "The gods intended that Roma should govern the world. We did for a thousand years or more, and did it damned well. We will again. Destiny's on Germanicus's side. Mark my words, there'll be Latin-speaking Emperors in this city again in our lifetime."

It was a long speech. Justina greeted it with a spell of silence that lasted almost as long.

Then she said, "It gets very cold in Gallia in the winter, does it not?"

"Rather cold, yes, so I'm told. Colder than here, certainly."

Too cold for her, that much he knew. Why would she even ask? It was unthinkable that she would want to go there. She would hate it there.

"It's very strange," he said, since she was saying nothing. "The Emperor is worthless and the brother that I thought was worthless turns out actually to be a bold and courageous man. If there's such a thing as a Roman soul, and I think there is, it goes westward with Germanicus tomorrow."

"And you, Lucius? Which way do you go?"

"We're Greeks, you and I. We'll be going the other way, Justina. Toward the East. Toward the sun. To Dalmatia, with Caesar."

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"You're a Roman, Lucius."

"More or less, yes. What of it?"

"Roma goes west. The coward Maximilianus goes east. Do you truly want to go with the coward, Lucius?"

Antipater gaped at her, stunned, unable to speak.

"Tell me, Lucius, how cold does it really get in Gallia in the winter? Is there very much snow?"

He found his voice, finally. "What are you trying to say, Justina?"

"What are *you* trying to say? Suppose I didn't exist. Which way would you go tomorrow, east or west?"

He paused only an instant. "West."

"To follow the Emperor's brother into the snow."

"Yes."

"The brother that you thought was worthless."

"The Emperor is worthless. Not so the brother, I begin to think. If you weren't in the equation, I'd probably go with him." Was it so, he wondered? Yes. Yes. It was so. "I'm a Roman. I'd want to act like a Roman, for once."

"Then go. Go!"

He felt the room rocking, as if in an earthquake. "And you, Justina?"

"I don't have to act like a Roman, do I? I could stay here, and continue to be a Greek—"

"No, Justina!"

"Or I could follow you and your new Emperor into the snow, I suppose." She wrapped her arms around her body and shivered, as though white flakes were already falling, here in their snug room. "Or, on the other hand, we still have the option, both of us, of going east with the other Emperor. The cowardly one who gave his throne away to be safe."

"I'm not very brave myself, you know."

"I know that. Yet you would go with Germanicus, if I were not here. So you just said. There's a difference between not being very brave and being a coward. Which is worse, I wonder, to walk through the snow once in a while, or to live in warmth among cowards? How can you live among cowards, unless you're a coward yourself?"

He had no answer. His head was throbbing. She had him outflanked on every front. He understood only that he loved her, he needed her, he would make whatever choice she wanted him to make. He waited for her to speak.

She was still holding herself against the imagined cold of an imagined winter, but she was smiling now. The cold was imaginary; the smile was real. "And so," she said. "A Roman, I will be. With you, in the snow, in Gallia. Is that a crazy thing, Lucius? Well, then. We can be crazy together. And try to keep each other warm wherever we go. —We should start packing, love. Your new Emperor is sailing for Massalia tomorrow, is that not what you said?" ❍

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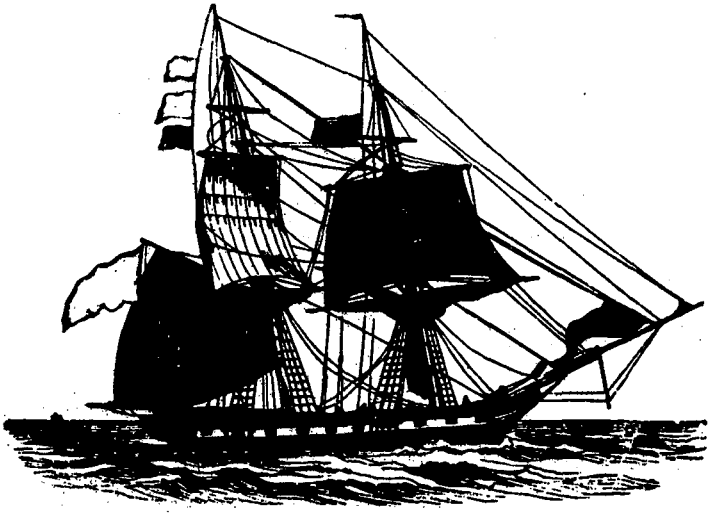
Kage Baker

THE WRECK OF THE GLADSTONE

Kage Baker's second novel of the Company, *Sky Coyote*, will be out from Harcourt Brace this fall. She tells us her latest tale for *Asimov's* is "just a simple story of sailors, shipwrecks, immortal heroes, and cyborgs."



On the fourteenth of November, 1893, the schooner yacht *Gladstone* encountered a storm in the Catalina channel off the harbor at Los Angeles, California. A northeastern gale capsized her and she sank within sight of the lights of San Pedro. It is a matter of recorded fact that all hands were lost, including the captain.

Nevertheless, the following August he returned to the scene of his death and peered down through the green water, and it seemed to him he could just discern her outline, green and waving, rippling and fading, the lost *Gladstone*.

Standing at the rail he wondered, miserably, if any of the mortals he had known were still down there with her, the owner with his long mustache, the sea-cook with his canvas apron.

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I could tell he was so miserably wondering because of the set of his mouth and his wide stare. I've known Kalugin since the summer of 1699 and have learned, in that time, to read his least thought in his countenance. It is indeed a dear countenance, but terribly at odds with itself; the eyes ought to be steel but are vague and frightened. The nose is as arrogant as an eagle's beak, the mouth shaped cruel for its hereditary work of ordering serfs to the pillory: yet the sharp features are blunted in the wide pink face. He doesn't really look like one of us at all.

"Come inside, dear." I touched his arm with my gloved hand. "We can't do anything until the morning."

"I shall have bad dreams," he replied. He turned to go with me, and his gaze fell hopefully upon the island off to the west. "Do you suppose any of the crew managed to swim ashore?"

"Certainly they might have." I gave his arm a squeeze. "But they'd have had to have been extraordinary swimmers. And history does record that all hands were lost, after all."

"Including me, my dear," he pointed out, and I was obliged to shrug in concession of his point. It is one of the laws of the time-manipulation business that history cannot be changed. It is one of its hazards, and conveniences, that this law can only be observed to apply to *recorded* history. We arrange matters to our advantage in perfect obedience to the known facts. Kalugin had gone down with his ship, and so conformed to the historical record. The fact that he had risen on the seafoam three days later, like Venus or Christ, was beside the point and out of the history books altogether. That fact that he had failed in his mission on that occasion was of greater consequence, and the reason for our present excursion.

I led him into the saloon of the *Chronos*, where dinner had just been served. Victor was standing at his place waiting for us, eyeing the repast with approval.

Victor is one of those white men with nearly transparent skin. His hair and beard are a startling red, his eyes pale green, and his features are small and precise as a kitten's. If he were mortal he might decay in time to a certain spare leonine dignity, but as it is he has perpetually the sharp edge of the adolescent cat. Victor was our Facilitator on this mission. He it was who had arranged for our yacht and its crew, and who had produced such papers as we might need to justify our actions to any mortals we might encounter. Other than the servants, of course. We were fortunate to have his assistance, for the customary glacial slowness of the Company in requisitioning such necessaries might have produced a delay of years before we attended to our present mission.

"Madame D'Araignee." He ushered me to my chair. "Captain Kalugin. It appears we're having 'Bounty of the Sea' tonight. Turtle soup, oysters, lobster salad, and Tunny à la Marechale. Just on the chance you don't get enough of the briny deep on the morrow, Kalugin."

Kalugin sighed and held out his glass for champagne. "It's all very well for you to laugh. Three days against the ceiling of that cabin! Do you know, when the storm had subsided enough for my rescue transport, I had *J.W. Coffin and Sons, Boston, Massachusetts* printed on my cheek? In mirror image, of course. From an inscription on the brasswork."

Victor laughed heartily. I thought what it must have been like, lying in darkness with drowned men, waiting for the storm to subside. I reached for Kalugin's hand under the table and squeezed it. He gave me a grateful look.

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"So here's a health to the Infant Hercules!" Victor raised his glass. "Let's hope the little devil is in reasonably good health, too, after his sojourn in the bosom of Aphrodite. Have you inspected the Laboratory yet, Nan? Everything to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, thank you." I leaned to the side as a mortal servant bent to ladle the soup into my plate. "They certainly gave me enough sponges. I didn't find the antifungal, however."

"It's down there. An entire drum of that and the other chemical you needed, the solvent, what's its name?"

"Diorox."

"Diorox, to be sure. I saw it loaded. Everything you need to restore the Son of Zeus to his original splendor should be present and accounted for."

"I'm sure that will prove to be the case."

"I really did seal it up quite tightly," asserted Kalugin. "There may be a little damage from the tacks. I did my best to remove them, but you've no idea—the rolling of the ship, and the shouting, and then the light had gone, you know, and the claw end of the hammer wasn't the right size."

"You should have used pliers," Victor admonished him briskly. "Though of course the really important thing, Kalugin, was the air-seal. We can only pray it withstood the impact when you dropped it."

"Oh, it must have." He twisted one corner of his napkin. "That's all covered in my report, you see, the cylinder landed in mud. The seal must have held. There shouldn't have been any errors."

"No, I daresay; the *equipment* scarcely ever malfunctions." Victor tasted his soup with a delicate grimace. Kalugin looked wretched. He turned to me.

"I'm afraid I might have torn one corner of the painting a little," he said apologetically. "I did mention that in my report as well."

"I'm sure it's of no consequence." I smiled at him. "Canvas repair is the simplest of processes. You forget, my dear, the Renaissance work I've done. You ought to see what the Italians do to their paintings! Floods and mud and bird droppings—"

"*If* you please!" Victor's spoon halted in its rise to his mustache.

"Pray excuse me." I had a sip of champagne.

"Have you spoken to Masaki?" Victor inquired of Kalugin.

"The diver? Yes, and she seems a knowledgeable sort. Appears to have done a lot of this sort of thing."

"She has. She's the best in her field."

"Might almost be able to handle the recovery operation herself, I imagine, if my nerve were to desert me," said Kalugin casually.

"Though, of course, it shan't." Victor gave him a hard smile across the table.

We talked about the mission until half-past eleven, and Kalugin drank too much champagne. I lay in the bunk across from him and watched as he slept it off. His eyes raced behind pale lids, his breath caught continually, and his soft hands pushed and pushed at something that would not leave him. It is a terrible thing to be immortal and have bad dreams.

At dawn I opened my eyes and the cabin was full of the sublimest clear pink light, the same tender shade one sees only in the winter season. Its delicate beauty was in harsh contrast to the hoarse profanities that resounded on the morning air.

Kalugin sat up and we stared at one another. We heard one of the Techni-

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cians approaching Victor's stateroom and saying, quite unnecessarily, "Vessel off our starboard bow, sir. Crew of two mortals. They're hailing us."

Hailing damnation on us, in fact, and worse things too. The voice echoing across the water was nearly incoherent with rage, backed up by the rattling throb of a steam engine, and growing closer with each moment. We heard Victor's door open and heard his rapid footsteps as he went on deck. We dressed hastily and followed him.

They were just coming abreast of us as we emerged. Victor, dignified in his dressing-gown, Turkish slippers and fez, was confronting a wiry little man in stained canvas trousers and an old jersey. The mortal was bounding up and down in his fury in the manner of a chimpanzee, which resemblance was furthered by the fact that his arms were muscular and enormous.

The other mortal stood at the tiller, a bedraggled girl in a faded cotton print dress. She was heavily with child, and appeared to be on the verge of tears. Their old fishing boat was in a bad way, even to my untrained eyes: her ironwork had risen like biscuit with flaked rust, and her old wood was pearl-gray. Some attempt had recently been made to make her seaworthy, but her days on the water were numbered, clearly. *ELSIE* was painted in trailing letters on her bow.

To render what her captain was saying into prose were to produce a stream of invective not grammatical but profound.

"For shame, sir!" cried Victor. "There are ladies present."

The general sense of the mortal's response was that Victor might take himself and his female companions to any other place in the seven seas save this one. Victor's mouth tightened and the points of his mustache stabbed the air.

"I will not, sir. I will conduct salvage operations here, having every legal right to do so," he stated. He might have continued, but Kalugin gave a sudden groan and clutched the rail.

"O God, it's Mackie Hayes!" he said. He didn't say it loudly, but all heads turned to stare at him. The gimlet eye of the vulgar sailor widened. He uttered a word I will not stain paper with and followed it with the cry of "Captain Pomeroy!"

Then, in an act of physical bravado I would not have thought a mortal man capable of performing, he vaulted the span of sea between his craft and ours and landed on the deck beside Kalugin. The girl at the tiller gave a weak scream. Kalugin found his lapels seized in an iron grip and the sailor's stubbled face a bare inch from his own.

"Where were ya?" shouted the sailor. "When the *Gladstone* was foundering and there was good men going to the bottom, I ask ya? Where were ya when the spars was snapping and the mast broke off clean? Hiding in yer bunk, ya no-good son of a w——!"

Kalugin had gone very white. He moistened his lips with his tongue and said, "You mistake me, sir. Captain Pomeroy was my father."

The sailor drew his head back to stare at him. He saw no grey in Kalugin's hair, he saw no lines about his eyes, he saw no scar upon his chin. Nor should he, for these things had been cosmetically applied to make Kalugin look like a mortal man and had been removed when no longer needed. The ferocity of his regard diminished somewhat and he released Kalugin's lapels.

"Well, d—n me if ya ain't the spit and image of Captain Pomeroy. But he was still a lily-livered coward, ya hear me? He was hiding below when the storm done its worst. Even Mister Vandycook the owner, *he* come up on deck to see what he could do, but not yer old man. So I d—n ya for the son of a lub-

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ber and no true seaman." He swung about to glare at Victor. "And the rest of ya for a pack of thieves. I lay claim to this salvage operation by rights of having survived the wreck of the *Gladstone*!"

There was a poignant silence on deck. We had encountered what we operatives of the Company most dread: an error in the historical record. Such loopholes can have fatal consequences for a mission. Victor considered the sailor.

"The *Gladstone* was reported lost with all hands, sir."

"Lost she were, but *I* didn't go down with her. Two days I hung on a barrel, kicking off the sharks, afore I washed up on that island yonder. Most of a year I been marooned there amongst landsmen. Took me better than three months to get that scow there seaworthy, and *I'm* salvaging the *Gladstone,* and be d—ned to you!"

"You are mistaken, sir." Victor smiled. "My firm purchased salvage rights on the wreck from its insurers."

There was a little cry of disappointment from the girl at this announcement. The sailor glanced once in her direction; then he turned back to squint at Victor. "Is that so? Well, they're there and I'm here. I can't make ya clear off, but ya can't make me leave neither, and we'll see who gets down to the *Gladstone* first!"

With that he hoisted himself up on our rail and sprang nimbly back to his own boat, which received his weight with a hollow crash that did not bode well for the integrity of her timbers. Victor stared after him, twisting one end of his mustache until it threatened to part company with his lip. Then he turned on his heel and stalked within, motioning us to follow.

"Lost with all hands!" he snapped as soon as we were gathered in the saloon.

"It's not my fault." Kalugin sagged into a chair. "I was below when the *Gladstone* went down. You know that. My orders were to rescue the priceless painting a New York millionaire stupidly kept in the cabin of his yacht. It was not my responsibility to see to it that the crew drowned. When the rescue transport picked me up after the storm they made a clean sweep of the area. They found no survivors. The historical record *says* there were no survivors."

"Well, now we know otherwise, don't we?" Victor went to the galley door and flung it open. "Coffee!" he shouted, and slammed it again and turned to pace up and down before us. "Who is this miserable little tattooed goat, may I ask?"

"Only one of the hands before the mast."

"Biographical data?"

Kalugin accessed. "Mackie Hayes, able-bodied seaman, age thirty-two, no residence given," he replied. "He was an excellent hand, unless he got liquor. He was a fighting drunk. I recall he nearly killed a man in Honolulu. Trouble with the ladies, too. I should guess his nationality to have been Yankee, despite his oddities of speech, which I believe were due to an old injury resulting in partial paralysis of the facial muscles on the right side."

"You may as well update your entry to present tense," remarked Victor bitterly. "We know very well he's alive and kicking."

"And salvaging," I pointed out.

There was a knock on the door. Victor opened it to receive the coffee tray, borne not by a mortal servant but by one of our Technicians.

"Sir, it appears the mortals are preparing to dive," he warned Victor. I leaned back to look out a porthole and saw the sailor running about on deck,

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setting up the air pump. His young lady came struggling up on deck bearing an unwieldy mass that proved to be an old diving suit. He snatched it from her and said some angry thing. She hurried back below and re-emerged a moment later with a great brass diving helmet in her arms. He was already shrugging into the suit.

"Even as we speak," I confirmed, accepting a cup and saucer from Victor.

"And, sir, we're reading a storm moving in from the southwest," said the Technician. "We expect heavy seas by twenty-three hundred hours. Shall we put in to the island? The charts show a good harbor with anchorage on the windward side."

"There's a thought." Victor dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee and stirred it. "And perhaps the storm will sink that filthy rust-bucket and save us the trouble."

There followed another poignant silence. The Technician cleared his throat. "Is that one of our options, sir?"

Kalugin rose to his feet.

"Possibly," said Victor at length. "You'll get your orders when we've made a decision. For now, go tell the cook we want breakfast. And I particularly want some cinnamon toast!" he called after the departing Technician.

Now it was Kalugin who paced back and forth, while Victor stood sipping his coffee. We heard a splash and the whirring as a drum of cable unwound.

"What do you think he's after, Kalugin?" inquired Victor.

"Not the painting, he couldn't be," panted Kalugin. "Even if he'd known what it was worth, he wouldn't have any reason to expect there to be anything left of it by now."

"What, then?"

"VanderCook's strongbox, I'm sure. Possibly some of the other *objets d'art*. There were some ormolu things, I remember, and a statuette. He might think they'd fetch a pretty price."

"And if he sees a shiny silver canister down there?" Victor drained his cup.

Kalugin bit his lip. "He'll probably bring it up."

The door opened. Victor turned, perhaps in expectation of his cinnamon toast, but our Underwater Recovery Specialist entered the room.

"Mme. Masaki." Kalugin bowed.

"Good morning. Victor, are you aware that a monkey in a diving suit just went over the side in the general direction of the *Gladstone*?"

"Quite aware. Did you manage to sleep through our little pre-dawn confrontation somehow?" Victor poured a cup of coffee and presented it to her.

"I wear earplugs. Are we aborting our mission, then?"

"Certainly not. Cream? Sugar?"

She shook her head. "We can't conduct a dive while that creature's down there."

"We might try," Kalugin ventured. She widened her eyes at him.

"Are you mad? That would be contrary to specific Company policy. Can we persuade him to leave, Victor?"

"Not easily." Victor steepled his fingers. "He's determined and rather combative. We may be obliged to hope for an accident."

Mme. Masaki put down her cup and simply looked at him. There was yet a third poignant silence.

"Good God, the woman is with child!" exploded Kalugin.

"We needn't touch her," Victor assured him. "Though her mate *might* have a nasty accident whilst below. Such dreadful things do happen at sea."

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I shook my head. "That would be murder, Victor."

"And it would fall to me to go down and cut his hose, I think," said Mme. Masaki. "I've never killed one of them before; I should prefer not to do it now, if you don't mind."

"You know, it's deuced hard being your Facilitator when you won't permit me to facilitate anything," Victor complained.

"Mr. Hayes won't listen to reason, but perhaps the girl. . . ?" I offered.

"Ahoy!" I waved a handkerchief at the mortal where she sat by the air pump, waiting for tugs on the line. "May we speak, Mademoiselle? I am so sorry that our gentlemen have had hard words. Please believe we had no intention of upsetting you."

She lifted her timid freckled face and gazed at me in wonder. "I never heard no colored lady talk like you before," she stated.

"I am from Algiers, Mademoiselle."

"Oh." She was thinking. "Is that in Europe?"

"No; but I have lived in both Paris and Rome."

"My Pa went to Europe once," she told me. "He stayed at a place called France, afore he shipped out again."

"Ah. Is your father a sailor, too?"

"No'm," she replied, and then stopped with the particular mortification Caucasians felt, in that day and age, upon accidentally addressing a Negro with an honorific. She cleared her throat and tried again. "No, he ain't, not no more. A hawser cut off his leg and now he and my ma has a farm on that island over there. Miss, I got to ask you. That man with the funny hat, do you work for him?"

"I am a guest of his, my dear."

"Well—do you suppose he will let us go shares with him on this wreck? If Mackie don't get what he's after—" her eyes filled with tears. "He's near crazy you folks showed up when you did. All he's been talking about since I found him on the beach was getting down to the wreck, the wreck, the wreck, and when we go come out here there your boat is sitting right over it. It's for our baby he wants it. He says it's his big chance," she implored.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Hayes, but it seems to me that if Mr. Hayes truly cared for you and for the child, he would put you ashore and take some fisherman out to assist him instead."

"Ain't nobody will go with him but me." She wiped her eyes. "He's been and had fights with all the neighbors and my Pa won't even talk to him any more."

"But, my dear, a woman in your condition! His behavior seems abominable."

"You might say so, Miss, but what of that?" She looked terribly earnest. "He's my man and the father of my child. I got to stand by him. I know he's meaner than a snake, but it was true love at first sight when I seen him lying there in the sand." She clasped her frail hands above her swollen abdomen. "Beside, Miss, there ain't any other men on the island what ain't married already."

"I see."

"So, Miss, you seem like a real nice girl. Won't you ask your friend about leaving just a little of the wreck for us? Mackie says there was all kinds of gold chairs and all on her. He never got his pay neither. And it's all for the *child's* sake," she added piteously.

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I smiled in my friendliest fashion. "I feel certain that my friend will be happy to compensate Mr. Hayes for his lost wages. Perhaps he even has some right to a share in the proceeds from the salvage. But, my dear, how much simpler things would be if he accepted the sum from us now—in gold—and took you home to your island without any further hardship to yourselves! Could you not persuade him to this, for the sake of the child? My friend is a most generous man."

A light of hope was born in her eyes, but just as she parted her lips to speak there came a jerk on the tether line and then another, setting up a thrumming echo in the cable housing.

"Oh! That's Mackie now. I got to bring him up," she exclaimed, and leaned into the crank and painfully hauled on the winch. "You'd best go," she gasped. "He'll get mad if he sees you."

I quit the deck gladly, for I could scarcely bear the sight of her efforts in her condition, and there was no way I could assist her. Kalugin was bent to a porthole in the saloon, watching.

"That man is a brute," he observed gloomily.

"Yes, but we may hope he is a brute with humane instincts," I said. "Surely, for her sake, he'll accept our proposal."

"Sweet voice of reason." He kissed my hand.

"All the same, Hayes won't agree to it," pronounced Victor where he sat, fists jammed in his trouser pockets.

"Why ever not? I think he must."

"You don't know them the way I do," was all he would say.

Presently we heard the clanking and splashing as Hayes came up, and the girl's little cries of effort as she helped him aboard. She helped him off with his helmet, too, and as soon as his head was free he cried:

"Gimme a hand with the rope!"

Kalugin went to the porthole to watch. He saw them haul in the rope, hand over hand, and then we heard something thumping against the side of the *Elsie*. "They've brought up VanderCook's strongbox," he announced. There followed a dragging crash. "They've got it on deck."

I went to look and just caught sight of Hayes staggering into their cabin with a steel box, closely followed by the girl. A moment later, raucous shouts of merriment rang out across the water.

"Four thousand dollars in gold," explained Kalugin.

"Then he's bound to put in to shore," I guessed. "He must think that was what we wanted. I should think he'll put about with all due haste, shouldn't you?"

Victor simply shook his head. "You don't know them the way I do," he repeated.

And he was correct in his assertion, for they did not leave. The *Elsie* and the *Chronos* lay at anchor, side by side, as the day wore on. Hayes did not attempt further salvage efforts. The swell of the sea increased somewhat, and a queer light on the southern horizon was prologue to a wall of cloud that appeared there, grey as a cat, advancing across the sky by inevitable degrees.

As we were sitting down to our luncheon repast we heard the sound of a violent quarrel from our neighbors, and tried our best not to listen, though Kalugin and I burned with silent indignation on behalf of the poor girl. Victor ignored the tumult, his cold composure untroubled.

At about half-past-three a hot wind sprang up, full in our faces, and it bore the perfume of jungle flowers many latitudes distant. It had been pleasant.

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had not such danger attended upon it. Kalugin lay down and slept, perspiring. Victor stared fixedly across at the *Elsie* and did not speak.

Sunset flamed with all the hues in the palette of fever, across a steadily rising sea. On the cushions where he reclined, Kalugin clutched his throat and sat up staring. "VanderCook!" he muttered.

"You've been dreaming, dear." I went to him.

His face was haunted. "The ship was going down. Turning as it went down. I was trying to hurry with the painting and *he* came in. VanderCook."

"Poor dear, you have had a conditioning nightmare," I explained. "We all have them when we can't complete a mission. As soon as we recover the painting they'll cease to trouble you."

"I had to kill him." Kalugin's mouth trembled. "He thought I was stealing his things. He took hold of my arm, but I didn't have time! I only hit him with the back of my hand, but he died. All of them died."

"Yet that *was* their mortal fate." I attempted to console him. "Death swiftly at your hand or some protracted agony of drowning, which would the poor man have preferred? It's not as though anything you did could have saved any of them. You saved the Delacroix, at least. Think of that! Consider, my dear, what you have preserved for the ages."

Kalugin drew a harsh breath. "Do you ever wonder whether we don't destroy as many things as we preserve by our meddling? I saved the painting, but perhaps if the ship had had a competent captain we wouldn't have foundered in the first place."

"Nonsense," said Victor forcefully. "For God's sake, man, what are you mourning? One self-indulgent millionaire and a handful of sailors like Hayes. And isn't *he* a prize? Which would you rather consign to the bottom, a work of art or a dirty little creature like Hayes? What possible difference can his nasty life make to the world?"

As if on cue, the shout came out of the twilight:

"Ahoy the *Chronos*! Ahoy! Ya think ya can buy me? Ya can't! I say I know what yer up to! And nobody cheats Mackie Hayes, ya hear me? Here I be and here I stay!"

Victor's mustaches swept up like scythe blades.

"I do believe," he announced, "that it's time to fix that man's little red wagon." And he rose and strode from the saloon.

I settled back on the cushions with Kalugin and we watched the last pink light fade.

"Remember the DaVinci notebook," I told him.

"True." He passed a hand across his eyes wearily.

"And the cargo of the *Geldermalsen*."

"True." With the other hand he drew out the pins and loosed my long hair.

"And Laperouse's logbook and specimens. All of them lost to the world forever, but for you, dearest."

"True." He closed his eyes. I leaned down to him. Dreamily he gathered up a tress and draped it across his face, making his night blacker still. "Yet sometimes I could wish . . ."

The stars shone briefly and then the advancing cloud cover put them out like candles. The sea was quite rough, now; we were obliged to weigh anchor and stand off from the *Elsie* some distance, lest we collide with her. Dinner was informal, cold meats and pickles and cheeses; no one had much appetite owing to the nature of the commotion in the bosom of the deep. How fortu-

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nate had we Immortals been, if our creators had thought to make us proof against *mal-de-mer*! I have often mused on this, during a long life of journeys on Company affairs.

At half-past-nine Victor strolled into the saloon looking pleased with himself, and settled down to read the latest issue of the *London Illustrated News*. Kalugin and I played at Piquet, with no great attention to the cards as the rolling of the ship grew more pronounced.

Before Victor had had a chance to lay down the paper and amuse us with the latest antics of the British royal family, however, the door opened and the same Technician who had been reporting to Victor all day put in his head.

"Mme. Masaki has come aboard again, sir."

Victor tossed his paper aside and hurried on deck. We followed and arrived just in time to see the expectant smile dashed from his face by Mme. Masaki's cry of "D—n you, Victor!"

"I beg your pardon." Victor drew himself up in as stiff an attitude of affront as he could manage on the pitching deck. She was advancing on him in her diving costume, her face pale in the light of the lantern, her eyes blazing with anger.

"Lower the whaleboat!" She swept her wet hair back from her face. "You've got to send someone to rescue the woman. That boat is sinking!"

"You were ordered to punch a few holes in it, not scuttle the infernal thing!" Victor narrowed his eyes.

"I started one plank and a whole seam opened up! It's coming to pieces in the water! D—n you, will you lower that boat?"

But Kalugin was giving orders for it already. Mme. Masaki braced herself on the rail, drawing deep breaths. "And another thing," she told us. "The woman's alone over there. I was unable to perceive more than one mortal on board."

"Only one?" Victor frowned. "Where could Hayes have got to?"

We were answered by a thump. It was not even a sound, no more than a faint sensation against the soles of our feet, imperceptible I believe to mortal senses; but there, it came again, sharper against our hull and more distinct. Both Victor and Mme. Masaki responded with oaths of the most profane nature. She plunged once more over the side and disappeared in the black water. As she vanished we heard terrified screams from the sole occupant of the cabin of the *Elsie*.

Kalugin and his crew rowed like heroes, but it was a near thing. The doomed craft was turning in the night sea, listing with a stricken motion. I clung to the rail watching, sick at heart lest the rescuers arrive too late.

Judge with what relief I saw Mrs. Hayes lifted from the deck of the doomed *Elsie* and settled securely in the bottom of the whaleboat. Even as it put about and made back toward us through the waves, Mme. Masaki pulled herself up on the rail with one arm. She had her other arm fast about Hayes, whom she had choked into unconsciousness. "Help me!" she cried.

Victor and I ran to assist her. Hayes lay ghastly pale in the lantern-light, a ridiculous wizened figure in his long undergarments. Victor knelt and I heard a smart click as he applied handcuffs to the oblivious sailor.

"I daresay that settles *your* hash," sneered Victor.

"Our hull is unbreached," reported Mme. Masaki. "Though somewhat scored. He was doing his best to sink us with a hammer and chisel. Had he been able to see what he was doing we'd have been in genuine danger. He's remarkably strong, for a mortal."

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"What shall we do with him?" I glanced out at the whaleboat, rapidly pulling close. "It would be well to remove him before the girl can see him like this, surely."

"As you wish." Victor seized the connecting chain of the manacles and dragged Hayes' inert form in the direction of the forward hatches. "I shall revive the blackguard and *then* . . ."

Even as he got Hayes safely out of sight below, the wind rose to a howl and the waves, previously wild, grew positively violent, dashing the whaleboat against the *Chronos*. I heard Mrs. Hayes screaming in the darkness, and Kalugin reassuring her; Mme. Masaki and I bent down to help her aboard. As we did so, I looked out across the night and beheld the *Elsie* swing back over, giving one great drunken lurch before she righted herself, only to slide below the water. One last second her cabin light was visible, eerily sinking down toward eternal darkness; then it had vanished and I knew the rushing water had found it.

I was prevented from dwelling on this horror by the necessity of getting my arms around Mrs. Hayes, just as a cold wave broke over us. She screamed again, and with a final struggle we got her feet on deck and there we three huddled, dripping, as the crew got the whaleboat up.

"We must take her inside," I shouted to Mme. Masaki, who responded with a brusque nod. We started along the rail to the door of the saloon; then Mrs. Hayes stopped abruptly and her thin fingers tightened on my arm. Her poor little face was like an animal's in its terror. She looked down, we followed her gaze, and saw a rush of water and blood. It steamed briefly on the deck before another wave mingled it with sea foam and swept it away.

She began crying, a shrill monotonous piping *Oh, Oh, Oh,* and we knew there was nothing for it but to take her by the arms and drag her, lest the child drop to the deck like a fish and tumble overboard.

And somehow we did bring her safely inside, half-carrying her to a bunk in one of the cabins, and saw her robed in a dry dressing-gown before we took that opportunity for ourselves; her thin cries grew fainter but did not cease the while.

"Mrs. Hayes, Mrs. Hayes, you must compose yourself." I sat down beside her. "For the child's sake, my dear."

"You don't know," she sobbed. "My Mackie's drowned. He was going over to—Oh, it's God's judgment, that's what it is! Oh, I'm so ashamed! And now he's lost—"

"Pray do not distress yourself, Mrs. Hayes, your husband is safe. We apprehended him. We have him safe below." I gave her a handkerchief.

"Oh!" Her cries stopped as she took that in. Then the weak line of her mouth trembled. "I tried to tell him what you said, but he got real mad. He said if you was so ready to pay him to let it alone, there must be lots of treasure in the wreck. And when he brought up all that money I said Well let's go home Mackie and not be greedy, but *he* said Elsie you're a dumb—he said I was a dumb—Oh, dear! And now we lost the money!" Her wails broke out afresh.

"Mrs. Hayes, you mustn't allow yourself to dwell on such things now. Think of your child! When did the pains begin?"

"Only just now." She gasped for breath. "Leastways—I been having a backache but I thought it was all the hauling I been doing." Her face contorted in the extremity of her discomfort. I gave her my arm to clutch tight, and as I did so made use of my scanning perception to take a reading on herself and

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her infant. Mortals are quite unable to discern such surreptitious examinations; had she not been already too distracted to notice my preoccupation, she might have supposed I was uttering a silent prayer.

I leaned back and stared at her. I saw again the cabin light of the *Elsie,* slipping away, slipping away down into the dark. I looked up at Mme. Masaki and transmitted my findings. Her lips drew back from her teeth.

We can't save them in such cases, you see. We mayn't interfere. Even if we could, this poor creature had seen things the Company had never intended a mortal to see. She was a complication. I did not even want to think about Victor down in the hold with the unconscious Hayes. There is a Company drug called Nepenthine, very useful in these unfortunate cases but not always entirely beneficial to those to whom it is administered. . . .

"You'll need fresh linen," murmured Mme. Masaki, and departed. She came back bearing a bundle with something concealed in it, and in one hand she carefully carried a glass of what appeared to be sherry wine.

"You like drink, miss?" She offered it to Mrs. Hayes.

"Oh, I've never touched Spirits—" she protested.

"But this is for the child's sake," I struck up my refrain again. "You must take it as medicine, my dear."

She allowed herself to be persuaded by this argument and in moments was blissfully unconscious, which permitted us to set up the anticontaminant apparatus. Hayes' child was born shortly thereafter. The wind howled in the rigging, waves broke over us in vain, the timbers of the *Chronos* creaked unceasing; the feeble cries were barely audible over the tumult of the storm, and did not last long.

Kalugin knew something was wrong when he passed Mme. Masaki in the passageway, her face closed and silent. He put his head round the door.

I sat with the infant in my lap, in a pool of light that moved as the lamp swung on its gimbal. Mrs. Hayes slept sound in her bunk.

"He's a boy, is he?" Kalugin came in and bent over us. The child lay still; it had already discovered that moving took much more strength than it had. Kalugin noticed the cyanosis at once, and scanning he found the heart defect. "Oh, dear," he said. He put a finger in the tiny cold hand, which closed on it without force. The infant worked its face into a squinting grimace that was a perfect parody of its father, but it did not cry. It hadn't enough breath.

Kalugin sat down beside me. I leaned against him and we watched the child fight.

"The mother will do well enough," I said tiredly. "For the present. Although her grief, and her brute of a husband, and her poverty and her disappointment will make her wonder why she should."

"Victor is finishing up with Hayes now," said Kalugin. "Nothing left to do but the post-hypnosis, I expect. As soon as the storm clears we can put them ashore, and well and truly wash our hands of the wretched things."

I nodded. The child made a gurgling sound and all its limbs stiffened. For a terrible moment we waited; but, like a swimmer cresting a wave, it struggled and drew another breath, and kept breathing.

"It's Pity, like the new-born babe, striding the blast," said Kalugin softly. "Here he is, come to visit us. Yes, hello, I know you well, don't I? You've lived in my heart this many a year. One more piece of mortal wreckage I must watch sink."

The rocking of the lamp was growing less; the squall was blowing out. Kalugin went on in his sleepy voice:

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"I've gone down with too many ships, Nan. Why couldn't they have made me strong, like Victor? I really ought to get into another line of work."

And we laughed at that, both of us, sadly, for none of us can ever, ever get into another line of work. We are what we are. Kalugin kissed me and took the child in his arms.

"You need to sleep, my love. I'll watch them a while. Go on."

So I went, gratefully, and (to admit my cowardice) readily enough as well, for I knew the child would be gone soon and I would be relieved to avoid any further mortal tragedy. Yet it seemed I was not to be spared that sorrow: for I was wakened from brief dreams by Mrs. Hayes crying out. I drew on my robe and ran to her cabin.

She was alone there, sitting up wild-eyed. "Where's my baby?" she demanded. "What did you do with my baby?"

I took both her hands in my own. "My dear, I know you are strong—"

"Why, what's all the to-do?" inquired Kalugin, coming in behind me. I whirled about to look at him. He was unshaven and his eyes were puffy with exhaustion, but there was an enormous jauntiness in his whole frame. "Here's the little chap!" And he produced the infant from inside his coat like a conjurer. I snatched the child from him and scanned it hastily.

It was not only still alive but vibrantly alive, its flesh a deep rose color, its tiny heart beating strongly. Not all the radiant health in the world could make it a pretty child, because it was the image of its father: nevertheless it had a certain goblin charm. So much was clear even without benefit of much examination: Kalugin had spirited the little thing off to the ship's dispensary and repaired its heart defect. If that were all!

As I probed deeper, my horrified perceptions made the shocking truth quite plain: the child had not merely been repaired but *modified!* Made one of Us, in a manner of speaking. Not to the extent of making him an Immortal, of course, for Kalugin had neither the knowledge, tools nor time to do such a dreadful thing: but I read enhanced abilities, certain crude structural improvements, favorable genetic mutations induced . . . I began to tremble as I realized the extent of the changes Kalugin had wrought. I attempted to scan a second time to be certain, but Mrs. Hayes was reaching out for him.

I put him in her arms. "It's a little boy, Mrs. Hayes," I told her in a faint voice.

"Oh, Mackie'll be ever so happy!" she exclaimed, and fell to examining him with delight. I turned wondering eyes to Kalugin. *Do you understand what you have done?*

You shan't tell anyone, he transmitted. *I shan't tell anyone. Who's to know?*

I had no words to respond to him that might suitably express my terror and dismay. To breach Company procedure in such a fashion was to risk far, far more serious consequences than disciplinary counseling. Oh, if he were ever found out!

"What's this, though?" Mrs. Hayes fretted, touching the thin red scar on the infant's breast.

"A birthmark, I should guess." Kalugin gathered me to him with an arm. I must have seemed in danger of fainting. "Nothing to concern you unduly, Mrs. Hayes. Why, he can have it covered with a tattoo when he grows up—for I daresay he'll be a sailor, like his father."

"I guess so." She looked wistful. "Though I kind of hope he turns out to be a Christian instead. Mackie don't hold with gospel much." Her face became woebegone as she remembered the predicament her mate was in. Kalugin patted her hand gallantly.

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"In view of the happy occasion, we have decided not to press charges against Mr. Hayes," he informed her. "Our intention is to set you ashore presently, with some remuneration for Mr. Hayes' services on the *Gladstone*, to which he is after all entitled. We do regret the loss of your boat, but she was scarcely seaworthy. You were lucky to escape with your lives. What a blessing we were standing by when she went down!"

She dissolved in tears of gratitude. I held close to Kalugin, marveling at him.

Some little while after I took Mrs. Hayes's things out on deck to dry them. The spiral of the storm was moving away to the north and it had become a fine morning, with strong sunlight and a freshening breeze. Sea-birds circled the *Chronos*, wheeling and mewing; dolphins leapt and sported in the glittering water all around us.

"Yes, all Nature rejoices at our success," said Victor grandly, pausing in a lap of his morning constitutional about the deck. "The loathsome Hayes is safely immured below, happy in his oblivion. He shan't wake until well after he's safely ashore and we've salvaged the *Gladstone*."

"You've persuaded him to discretion?" I spread out a shabby cotton frock in the sunlight.

"Oh, quite. If he ever does speak of us to anyone, it'll be in such a way his hearers will condemn him for a rank liar or a lunatic. Never fear. I gather the unfortunate female pupped, by the way?"

I pursed my lips. "Yes, the poor child had her blessed event early this morning. Need we do anything further? Her lot could scarcely be made more unfortunate. Ought we not err on the side of compassion and set her ashore without further processing?"

"Hm! I suppose so. Some sort of humane gesture might be in order. She's got to live with Hayes, after all! Though I rather think he'll ship out on the first vessel he can hail, now that his prospects for the *Gladstone* are gone. Didn't strike me as a family man."

This was certainly likely, and for Mrs. Hayes's sake I could not be unhappy at the prospect of her abandonment by such a creature. But in truth there was some quality of ineffable happiness in the morning air, for all the violent and near-tragic events of the night now past, some celestial mirth at some tremendous joke. And the unthinkable joke was on Victor, after all. *So long as he never found out what Kalugin had done. . . .*

Toward midday we put in to the island, where Mrs. Hayes directed us to a likely anchorage. The settlement there was no more than a cluster of squatters' shacks, grey and leaning with age, tucked away in the ravines under the looming mountains of the interior. A few goats grazed on the hills; there were a few garden patches where patient industry had coaxed forth a few dry cabbage and spinach plants, and one or two fig trees. Upon this dismal prospect Mrs. Hayes looked with fond anticipation, when she could bear to lift her regard from happy contemplation of the child who slept shaded in her bosom, and allowed herself to be handed down into the whaleboat without a murmur. She did look up with timid concern when Hayes was brought up on deck in a stretcher; she did squeak and flutter in a wifely way as the servants loaded him into the whaleboat; but it was evident that their parting, when it should occur, would be considerably softened by the presence of her boy.

With a merry face Kalugin bent to the oars to take them to land. Mme.

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Masaki and I waved our handkerchiefs in farewell, Victor beamed on them in his cold way, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets; a band of ragged children came running down to the water's edge to help the passengers ashore. I felt again the sensation of being present at some event of cosmic significance, on that bright day in that remote place; yet I have been present at several significant moments in history without any such mysterious intimations at all.

We put to sea again and returned to the site of the wreck. Once we had blessed *privacy,* it took less than two hours to locate and retrieve the long cylinder containing the lost painting. Kalugin and Mme. Masaki rose to the surface bearing it between them, and when it was safely on board it was borne straight to my laboratory, where, having made all the necessary preparations, I waited to receive it and begin the work of restoration.

When he had bathed and rested from his ordeal, Kalugin stopped in to visit me as I bent over the object of our concern.

"How badly was it damaged?" he inquired.

"Not badly at all, dearest. There are a few little tears. The varnish bloomed, as you see, but really I have seen much worse."

Kalugin leaned close to consider Delacroix's great canvas opened out before us. An outdoor temple was the setting, milk-white columns rising into a sky black and churning with storm clouds. From the upper-right-hand corner, Jupiter looked down on the scene with paternal indulgence and a certain Gallic smirk. Juno his spouse regarded him from the upper-left-hand corner, her stare terrible and direct, holding in her raised hands the serpents with which she intended to avenge herself. Their bright coils and the rings of her bracelets formed spiraling patterns of energy echoed in the draperies on Queen Alcmena's couch, down in the center-right of the canvas; she must have had a Celtic needlewoman. The Queen herself lay in a cozy pool of golden light, pale limbs slack with the exhaustion of her labor, lifting sweet vacant features to the midwife. This figure stood half-silhouetted in the left foreground, enigmatic and powerful, holding up the infant demigod; and he was rendered with strong and twisting brushstrokes in smoky red, not an idealized cherub at all but a howling, flailing, bloody newborn.

"Extraordinary painting," remarked Kalugin. "What contrasts! Sentimental and crude all at once. What can the artist have been thinking of?"

"It's an allegory, dear," I explained, reaching for another scrap of cotton-wool. "There was some kind of scandal in Paris society. Someone the artist knew was a co-respondent in a *dread*fully public divorce trial, with a question of paternity. The painting was done as a joke, in rather poor taste I think, and was never exhibited for that reason."

"What vile, silly creatures they are." Kalugin shook his head. "And yet, look: out of such a sordid business comes beauty. I am not sorry for what I did."

I set down my materials and turned, taking his hand firmly in my own. *You mustn't speak of that again, my love. Not ever.*

Never again, he agreed. *But if I lay at the bottom of the sea a thousand nights for it, still would I have done the same.*

He kissed me and went away to his own duties. Presently the sunlight slanted and moved along the wall: the *Chronos* was tacking about, taking us home to Europe. I opened another bottle of cleaning solvent and settled in to the rhythms of my work, making fresh and new again the old story of the birth of the Hero. ○

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NOVEMBER

November drifts on the calendar
dripping phantoms
like leaves.

I make a tea
and invite the ghosts
never pretending my home
is anything more than
a ruin.

—Wendy Rathbone

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Robert Reed

WHIPTAIL

Inspiration for "Whiptail" came from two sources. Musings on sexual reproduction— "a successful model is always a dead end. The participants' genetics are diluted by half with each mating, and half of our species can't bear children"—and the childhood memory of a dying Nebraska town that had two bars, a dirt road, and an enormous church on a hill that was bigger than all the other metro buildings.

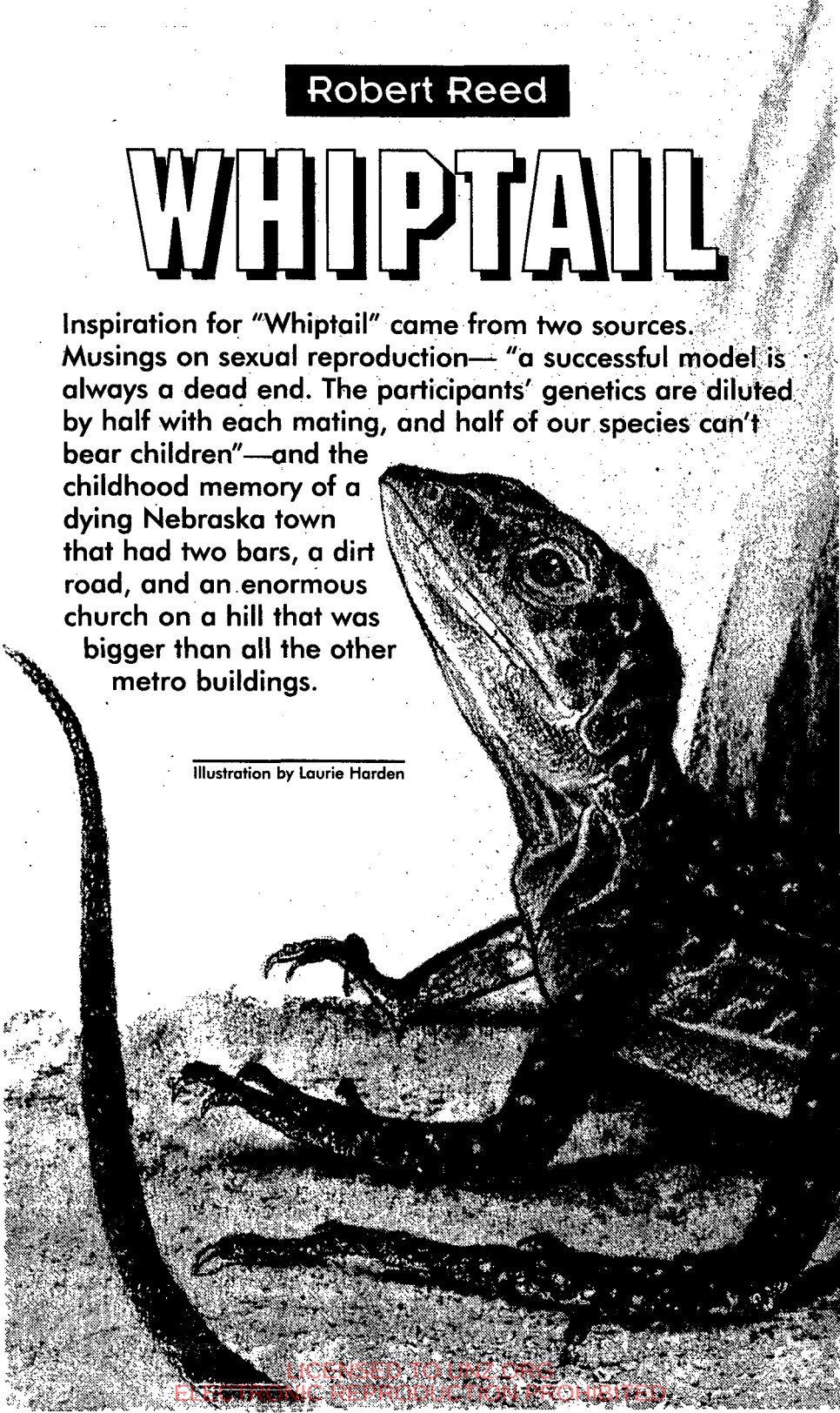

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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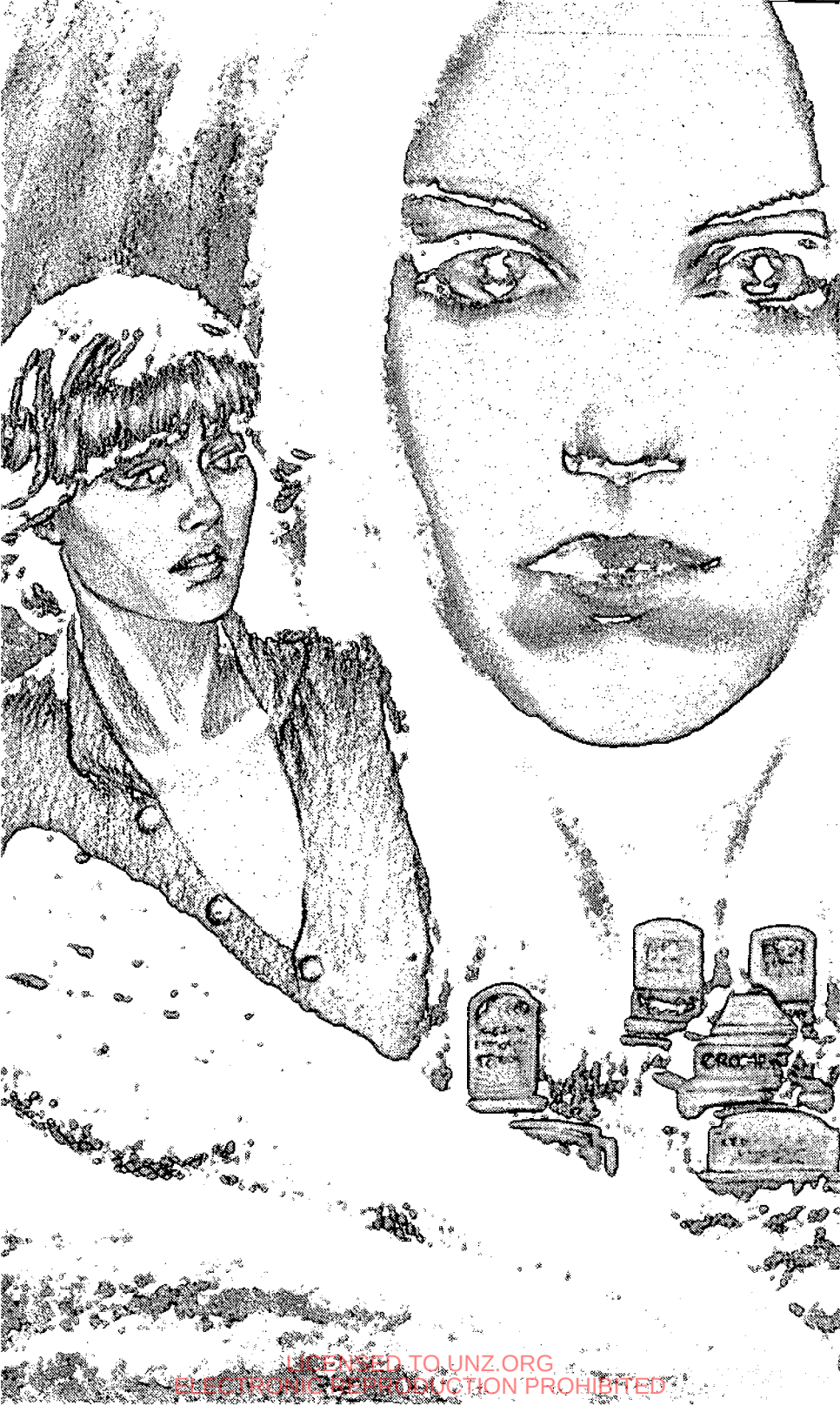

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"What a beautiful morning," I was singing. "And so strange! Isn't it? This incredible, wonderful fog, and how the frost clings everywhere. Lovely, lovely, just lovely. Is this how it always is, Chrome. . . ?"

"Always," she joked, laughing quietly. Patiently. "All year long, practically."

She was teasing. I knew that, and I didn't care. A river of words just kept pouring out of me: I was talking about the scenery and the hour, and goodness, we were late and her poor mother would be waiting, and God on her throne, I was hungry. Sometimes I told my Chrome to drive faster, and she would, and then I would find myself worrying, and I'd tell her, "Slow down a little." I'd say, "This road doesn't look all that dry."

Chrome smiled the whole time, not minding my prattle.

At least I hoped she didn't.

I can't help what I am. Dunlins, by nature, are small and electric. Nervous energy always bubbling. Particularly when they're trying not to be nervous. Particularly when their lover is taking them to meet her family for the first time.

"Have you ever seen a more magical morning, Chrome?"

"Never," she promised, her handsome face smiling at me.

It was the morning of the Solstice, which helped that sense of magic. But mostly it was because of the weather. A powerful cold front had fallen south from the chilly Arctic Sea, smashing into the normally warm winter air. The resulting fog was luscious thick, except in sudden little patches where it was thin enough to give us a glimpse of the pale northern sun. Wherever the fog touched a cold surface, it froze, leaving every tree limb and bush branch and tall blade of grass coated with a glittering hard frost. Whiteness lay over everything. Everything wore a delicate, perishable whiteness born of degrees. A touch colder, and there wouldn't have been any fog. Warmed slightly, and everything white would have turned to vapor and an afternoon's penetrating dampness.

The road had its own magic. A weathered charm, I'd call it. Old and narrow, its pavement was rutted by tires and cracked in places, and the potholes were marked with splashes of fading yellow paint. Chrome explained that it had been thirty years since the highway association had touched it. "Not enough traffic to bother with," she said. We were climbing up a long hillside, and at the top, where the road flattened, there was a corner and a weedy graveled road that went due south.

"Our temple's down there," she told me.

I looked and looked, but all I saw was the little road flanked by the white farm fields, both vanishing into the thickest fog yet.

For maybe the fiftieth time, I asked, "How do I look?"

"Awful," she joked.

Then she grabbed my knee, and with a laughing voice, Chrome said, "No, you look gorgeous, darling. Just perfect."

I just hoped that I wasn't too ugly. That's all.

We started down a long hillside, passing a small weathered sign that quietly announced that we were entering Chromatella. I read the name aloud, twice. Then came the first of the empty buildings, set on both sides of the little highway. My Chrome had warned me, but it was still a sad shock. There were groceries and hardware stores and clothing stores and gas stations, and all of them were slowly collapsing into their basements, old roofs pitched this way and that. One block of buildings had been burned down. A pair of

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Chrome's near-daughters had been cooking opossum in one of the abandoned kitchens. At least that was the official story. But my Chrome gave me this look, confessing, "When I was their age, I wanted to burn all of this. Every night I fought the urge. It wasn't until I was grown up that I understood why Mother left these buildings alone."

I didn't understand why, I thought. But I managed not to admit it.

A big old mothering house halfway filled the next block. Its roof was in good repair, and its white walls looked like they'd been painted this year. Yet the house itself seemed dark and drab compared to the whiteness of the frost. Even with the OPEN sign flashing in the window, it looked abandoned. Forgotten. And awfully lonely.

"Finally," my Chrome purred. "She's run out of things to say."

Was I that bad? I wondered.

We pulled up to the front of the house, up under the verandah, and I used the mirror, checking my little Dunlin face before climbing out.

There was an old dog and what looked like her puppies waiting for us. They had long wolfish faces and big bodies, and each of them wore a heavy collar, each collar with a different colored tag. "Red Guard!" Chrome shouted at the mother dog. Then she said, "Gold. Green. Pink. Blue. Hello, ladies. Hello!"

The animals were bouncing, and sniffing. And I stood like a statue, trying to forget how much dogs scare me.

Just then the front door crashed open, and a solid old voice was shouting, "Get away from her, you bitches! Get!"

Every dog bolted.

Thankfully.

I looked up at my savior, then gushed, "Mother Chromatella. I'm *so* glad to meet you, finally!"

"A sweet Dunlin," she said. "And my first daughter, too."

I shook the offered hand, trying to smile as much as she smiled. Then we pulled our hands apart, and I found myself staring, looking at the bent nose and the rounded face and the gray spreading through her short black hair. That nose was shattered long ago by a pony, my Chrome had told me. Otherwise the face was the same, except for its age. And for the eyes, I noticed. They were the same brown as my Chrome's, but when I looked deep, I saw something very sad lurking in them.

Both of them shivered at the same moment, saying, "Let's go inside."

I said, "Fine."

I grabbed my suitcase, even though Mother Chromatella offered to carry it. Then I followed her through the old door with its cut-glass and its brass knob and an ancient yellow sign telling me, "Welcome."

The air inside was warm, smelling of bacon and books. There was a long bar and maybe six tables in a huge room that could have held twenty tables. Bookshelves covered two entire walls. Music was flowing from a radio, a thousand voices singing about the Solstice. I asked where I should put my things, and my Chrome said, "Here," and wrestled the bag from me, carrying it and hers somewhere upstairs.

Mother Chrome asked if it was a comfortable trip.

"Very," I said. "And I adore your fog!"

"My fog." That made her laugh. She set a single plate into the sink, then ran the tap until the water was hot. "Are you hungry, Dunlin?"

I said, "A little, yes," when I could have said, "I'm starving."

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My Chrome came downstairs again. Without looking her way, Mother Chrome said, "Daughter, we've got plenty of eggs here."

My Chrome pulled down a clean skillet and spatula, then asked, "The others?"

Her sisters and near-daughters, she meant.

"They're walking up. Now, or soon."

To the Temple, I assumed. For their Solstice service.

"I don't need to eat now," I lied, not wanting to be a burden.

But Mother Chrome said, "Nonsense," while smiling at me. "My daughter's hungry, too. Have a bite to carry you over to the feast."

I found myself dancing around the main room, looking at the old neon beer signs and the newly made bookshelves. Like before, I couldn't stop talking. Jabbering. I asked every question that came to me, and sometimes I interrupted Mother Chrome's patient answers.

"Have you ever met a Dunlin before?"

She admitted, "Never, no."

"My Chrome says that this is the oldest mothering house in the district? Is that so?"

"As far as I know—"

"Neat old signs. I bet they're worth something, if you're a collector."

"I'm not, but I believe you're right."

"Are these shelves walnut?"

"Yes."

"They're beautiful," I said, knowing that I sounded like a brain-damaged fool. "How many books do you have here?"

"Several thousand, I imagine."

"And you've read all of them?"

"Once, or more."

"Which doesn't surprise me," I blurted. "Your daughter's a huge reader, too. In fact, she makes me feel a little stupid sometimes."

From behind the bar, over the sounds of cooking eggs, my Chrome asked, "Do I?"

"Nonsense," said Mother Chrome. But I could hear the pride in her voice. She was standing next to me, making me feel small—in so many ways, Chromatellas are big strong people—and she started to say something else. Something else kind, probably. But her voice got cut off by the soft *bing-bing-bing* of the telephone.

"Excuse me," she said, picking up the receiver.

I looked at my Chrome, then said, "It's one of your sisters. She's wondering what's keeping us."

"It's not." My Chrome shook her head, saying, "That's the out-of-town ring." And she looked from the eggs to her mother and back again, her brown eyes curious but not particularly excited.

Not then, at least.

The eggs got cooked and put on plates, and I helped pour apple juice into two clean glasses. I was setting the glasses on one of the empty tables when Mother Chrome said, "Good-bye. And thank you." Then she set down the receiver and leaned forward, resting for a minute. And her daughter approached her, touching her on the shoulder, asking, "Who was it? Is something wrong?"

"Corvus," she said.

I recognized that family name. Even then.

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She said, "My old instructor. She was calling from the Institute . . . to warn me. . . ."

"About what?" my Chrome asked. Then her face changed, as if she realized it for herself. "Is it done?" she asked. "Is it?"

"And it's been done for a long time, apparently. In secret." Mother Chrome looked at the phone again, as if she still didn't believe what she had just heard. That it was a mistake, or someone's silly joke.

I said nothing, watching them.

My Chrome asked, "When?"

"Years ago, apparently."

Mine asked, "And they kept it a secret?"

Mother Chrome nodded and halfway smiled. Then she said, "Today," and took a huge breath. "Dr. Corvus and her staff are going to hold a press conference at noon. She wanted me to be warned. And thank me, I guess."

My Chrome said, "Oh, my."

I finally asked, "What is it? What's happening?"

They didn't hear me.

I got the two plates from the bar and announced, "These eggs smell *gorgeous*."

The Chromatellas were trading looks, saying everything with their eyes.

Just hoping to be noticed, I said, "I'm awfully hungry, really. May I start?"

With the same voice, together, they told me, "Go on."

But I couldn't eat alone. Not like that. So I walked up to my Chrome and put an arm up around her, saying, "Join me, darling."

She said, "No."

Smiling and crying at the same time, she confessed, "I'm not hungry anymore."

She was the first new face in an entire week.

Even in Boreal City, with its millions from everywhere, there are only so many families and so many faces. So when I saw the doctor at the clinic, I was a little startled. And interested, of course. Dunlins are very social people. We love diversity in our friends and lovers, and everywhere in our daily lives.

"Dunlins have weak lungs," I warned her.

She said, "Quiet," as she listened to my breathing. Then she said, "I know about you. Your lungs are usually fine. But your immune system has a few holes in it."

I was looking at her face. Staring, probably.

She asked if I was from the Great Delta. A substantial colony of Dunlins had built that port city in that southern district, its hot climate reminding us of our homeland back on Mother's Land.

"But I live here now," I volunteered. "My sisters and I have a trade shop in the new mall. Have you been there?" Then I glanced at the name on her tag, blurting out, "I've never heard of the Chromatellas before."

"That's because there aren't many of us," she admitted.

"In Boreal?"

"Anywhere," she said. Then she didn't mention it again.

In what for me was a rare show of self-restraint, I said nothing. For as long as we were just doctor and patient, I managed to keep my little teeth firmly planted on my babbling tongue. But I made a point of researching her name, and after screwing up my courage and asking her to dinner, I confessed what

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I knew and told her that I was sorry. "It's just so tragic," I told her, as if she didn't know. Then desperate to say anything that might help, I said, "In this day and age, you just don't think it could ever happen anywhere."

Which was, I learned, a mistake.

My Chrome regarded me over her sweet cream dessert, her beautiful eyes dry and her strong jaw pushed a little forward. Then she set down her spoon and calmly, quietly told me all of those dark things that doctors know, and every Chromatella feels in her blood:

Inoculations and antibiotics have put an end to the old plagues. Families don't have to live in isolated communities, in relative quarantine, fearing any stranger because she might bring a new flu bug, or worse. People today can travel far, and if they wish, they can live and work in the new cosmopolitan cities, surrounded by an array of faces and voices and countless new ideas.

But the modern world only seems stable and healthy.

Diseases mutate. And worse, new diseases emerge every year. As the population soars, the margin for error diminishes. "Something horrible will finally get loose," Dr. Chromatella promised me. "And when it does, it'll move fast and it'll go everywhere, and the carnage is going to dwarf all of the famous old epidemics. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind."

I am such a weakling. I couldn't help but cry into my sweet cream.

A strong hand reached across and wiped away my tears. But instead of apologizing, she said, "Vulnerability," and smiled in a knowing way.

"What do you mean?" I sniffled.

"I want my daughters to experience it. If only through their mother's lover."

How could I think of love just then?

I didn't even try.

Then with the softest voice she could muster, my Chrome told me, "But even if the worst does happen, you know what we'll do. We'll pick ourselves up again. We always do."

I nodded, then whispered, "We do, don't we?"

"And I'll be there with you, my Dunnie."

I smiled at her, surprising myself.

"Say that again," I told her.

"I'll be with you. If you'll have me, of course."

"No, that other part—"

"My Dunnie?"

I felt my smile growing and growing.

"Call up to the temple," my Chrome suggested.

"Can't," her mother replied. "The line blew down this summer, and nobody's felt inspired to put it up again."

Both of them stared at the nearest clock.

I stared at my cooling eggs, waiting for someone to explain this to me.

Then Mother Chrome said, "There's that old television in the temple basement. We have to walk there and set it up."

"Or we could eat," I suggested. "Then drive."

My Chrome shook her head, saying, "I feel like walking."

"So do I," said her mother. And with that both of them were laughing, their faces happier than even a giddy Dunlin's.

"Get your coat, darling," said my Chrome.

I gave up looking at my breakfast.

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Stepping out the back door, out into the chill wet air, I realized that the fog had somehow grown thicker. I saw nothing of the world but a brown yard with an old bird feeder set out on a tree stump, spilling over with grain, dozens of brown sparrows and brown-green finches eating and talking in soft cackles. From above, I could hear the ringing of the temple bells. They sounded soft and pretty, and suddenly I remembered how it felt to be a little girl walking between my big sisters, knowing that the Solstice ceremony would take forever, but afterward, if I was patient, there would come the feast and the fun of opening gifts.

Mother Chrome set the pace. She was quick for a woman of her years, her eyes flipping one way, then another. I knew that expression from my Chrome. She was obviously thinking hard about her phone call.

We were heading south, following an empty concrete road. The next house was long and built of wood, three stories tall and wearing a steeply pitched roof. People lived there. I could tell by the roof and the fresh coat of white paint, and when we were close, I saw little tractors for children to ride and old dolls dressed in farmer clothes, plus an antique dollhouse that was the same shape and color as the big house.

I couldn't keep myself from talking anymore.

I admitted, "I don't understand. What was that call about?"

Neither spoke, at first.

On the frosty sidewalk I could see the little shoeprints of children, and in the grass, their mothers' prints. I found myself listening for voices up ahead, and giggles. Yet I heard nothing but the bells. Suddenly I wanted to be with those children, sitting in the temple, nothing to do but sing for summer's return.

As if reading my mind, Mother Chrome said, "We have a beautiful temple. Did you see it in all *my* fog?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Beautiful," she repeated. "We built it from the local sandstone. More than a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Yes, ma'am," I muttered.

Past the long house, tucked inside a grove of little trees, was a pig pen. There was a strong high fence, electrified and barbed. The shaggy brown adults glared at us, while their newest daughters, striped and halfway cute, came closer, begging for scraps and careless fingers.

I asked again, "What about that call? What's so important?"

"We were always a successful family," said Mother Chrome. "My daughter's told you, I'm sure."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mostly we were farmers, but in the last few centuries, our real talents emerged. We like science and the healing arts most of all."

My Chrome had told me the same thing. In the same words and tone.

We turned to the west, climbing up the hill toward the temple. Empty homes left empty for too long lined both sides of the little street. They were sad and sloppy, surrounded by thick stands of brown weeds. Up ahead of us, running from thicket to thicket, was a flock of wild pheasants, dark brown against the swirling fog.

"Chromatellas were a successful family," she told me, "and relatively rich, too."

Just before I made a fool of myself, I realized that Mother Chrome was trying to answer my questions.

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"Nearly forty years ago, I was awarded a student slot at the Great Western Institute." She looked back at me, then past me. "It was such a wonderful honor and a great opportunity. And of course my family threw a party for me. Complete with a parade. With my mother and my grand, I walked this route. This ground. My gown was new, and it was decorated with ribbons and flower blossoms. Everyone in Chromatella stood in two long lines, holding hands and singing to me. My sisters. My near-sisters. Plus travelers at the mother house, and various lovers, too."

I was listening, trying hard to picture the day.

"A special feast was held in the temple. A hundred fat pigs were served. People got drunk and stood up on their chairs and told the same embarrassing stories about me, again and again. I was drunk for the first time. Badly. And when I finished throwing up, my mother and sisters bundled me up, made certain that my inoculation records were in my pocket, then they put me on the express train racing south."

We were past the abandoned homes, and the bells were louder. Closer.

"When I woke, I had a premonition. I realized that I would never come home again. Which is a common enough premonition. And silly. Of course your family will always be there. Always, always. Where else can they be?"

Mother Chrome said those last words with a flat voice and strange eyes.

She was walking slower now, and I was beside her, the air tingling with old fears and angers. And that's when the first of the tombstones appeared: Coming out of the cold fog, they were simple chunks of fieldstone set on end and crudely engraved.

They looked unreal at first.

Ready to dissolve back into the fog.

But with a few more steps, they turned as real as any of us, and a breath of wind began blowing away the worst of the fog, the long hillside suddenly visible, covered with hundreds and thousands of crude markers, the ground in front of each slumping and every grave decorated with wild flowers: Easy to seed, eager to grow, requiring no care and perfectly happy in this city of ghosts.

When my great was alive, she loved to talk about her voyage from Mother's Land. She would describe the food she ate, the fleas in her clothes, the hurricane that tore the sails from the ship's masts, and finally the extraordinary hope she felt when the New Lands finally passed into view.

None of it ever happened to her, of course.

The truth is that she was born on the Great Delta. It was her grand who had ridden on the immigrant boat, and what she remembered were her grand's old stories. But isn't that the way with families? Surrounded by people who are so much like you, you can't help but have their large lives bleed into yours, and yours, you can only hope, into theirs.

Now the Chromatellas told the story together.

The older one would talk until she couldn't anymore, then her daughter would effortlessly pick up the threads, barely a breath separating their two voices.

Like our great cities, they said, the Institutes are recent inventions.

Even four decades ago, the old precautions remained in effect. Students and professors had to keep their inoculation records on hand. No one could travel without a doctor's certificate and forms to the Plague Bureau. To be given the chance to actually live with hundreds and thousands of people who

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didn't share your blood—who didn't even know you a little bit—was an honor and an astonishment for the young Chromatella.

After two years, she earned honors and new opportunities. One of her professors hired her as a research assistant, and after passing a battery of immunological tests, the two of them were allowed up into the wild mountain country. Aboriginals still lived the old ways. Most kept their distance. But a brave young person came forward, offering to be their guide and provider and very best friend. Assuming, of course, that they would pay her and pay her well.

She was a wild creature, said Mother Chrome.

She hunted deer for food and made what little clothing she needed from their skins. And to make herself more beautiful to her sister-lover, she would rub her body and hair with the fresh fat of a bear.

In those days, those mountains were barely mapped.

Only a handful of biologists had even walked that ground, much less made a thorough listing of its species.

As an assistant, Mother Chrome was given the simple jobs: She captured every kind of animal possible, by whatever means, measuring them and marking their location on the professor's maps, then killing them and putting them away for future studies. To catch lizards, she used a string noose. Nooses worked well enough with the broad-headed, slow-witted fence lizards. But not with the swift, narrow-headed whiptails. They drove her crazy. She found herself screaming and chasing after them, which was how she slipped on rocks and tumbled to the rocky ground below.

The guide came running.

Her knee was bleeding and a thumb was jammed. But the Chromatella was mostly angry, reporting what had happened, cursing the idiot lizards until she realized that her hired friend and protector was laughing wildly.

"All right," said Mother Chrome. "You do it better!"

The guide rose and strolled over to the nearest rock pile, and after waiting forever with a rock's patience, she easily snatched up the first whiptail that crawled out of its crevice.

A deal was soon struck: One copper for each whiptail captured.

The guide brought her dozens of specimens, and whenever there was a backlog, she would sit in the shade and watch Mother Chrome at work. After a while, with genuine curiosity, the guide asked, "Why?" She held up a dull brown lizard, then asked, "Why do you put this one on that page, while the one in your hand goes on that other page?"

"Because they're different species," Mother Chrome explained. Then she flipped it on its back, pointing and saying, "The orange neck is the difference. And if you look carefully, you can tell that they're not quite the same size."

But the guide remained stubbornly puzzled. She shook her head and blew out her cheeks as if she was inflating a balloon.

Mother Chrome opened up her field guide. She found the right page and pointed. "There!" At least one field biologist had come to the same easy conclusion: Two whiptails, two species. Sister species, obviously. Probably separated by one or two million years of evolution, from the looks of it.

The guide gave a big snort.

Then she calmly put the orange neck into her mouth and bit off the lizard's head, and with a small steel blade, she opened up its belly and groin, telling Mother Chrome, "Look until you see it. Until you can."

Chromatellas have a taste for details. With a field lens and the last of her

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patience, she examined the animal's internal organs. Most were in their proper places, but a few were misplaced, or they were badly deformed.

The guide had a ready explanation:

"The colorful ones are lazy ladies," she claimed. "They lure in the drab ones with their colors, and they're the aggressors in love. But they never lay any eggs. What they do, I think, is slip their eggs inside their lovers. Then their lovers have to lay both hers and the mate's together, in a common nest."

It was an imaginative story, and wrong.

But it took the professor and her assistant another month to be sure it was wrong, and then another few months at the Institute to realize what was really happening.

And at that point in the story, suddenly, the two Chromatellas stopped talking. They were staring at each other, talking again with their eyes.

We were in the oldest, uppermost end of the cemetery. The tombstones there were older and better made, polished and pink and carefully engraved with nicknames and birthdates and deathdates. The temple bells were no longer ringing. But we were close now. I saw the big building looming over us for a moment, then it vanished as the fog thickened again. And that's when I admitted, "I don't understand." I asked my Chrome, "If the guide was wrong, then what's the right explanation?"

"The lizard is one species. But it exists in two forms." She sighed and showed an odd little smile. "One form lays eggs. While the other one does nothing. Nothing but donate half of its genetic information, that is."

I was lost.

I felt strange and alone, and lost, and now I wanted to cry, only I didn't know why. How could I know?

"As it happens," said Mother Chrome, "a team of biologists working near the south pole were first to report a similar species. A strange bird that comes in two forms. It's the eggless form that wears the pretty colors."

Something tugged at my memory.

Had my Chrome told me something about this, or did I read about it myself? Maybe from my days in school . . . maybe. . . ?

"Biologists have found several hundred species like that," said my Chrome. "Some are snakes. Some are mice. Most of them are insects." She looked in my direction, almost smiling. "Of course flowering plants do this trick, too. Pollen is made by the stamen, and the genetics in the seeds are constantly mixing and remixing their genes. Which can be helpful. If your conditions are changing, you need to make new models to keep current. To evolve."

Again, the temple appeared from the fog.

I had been promised something beautiful, but the building only looked tall and cold to me. The stone was dull and simple and sad, and I hated it. I had to chew on my tongue just to keep myself from saying what I was thinking.

What was I thinking?

Finally, needing to break up all this deep thinking, I turned to Mother Chrome and said, "It must have been exciting, anyway. Being one of the first to learn something like that."

Her eyes went blind, and she turned and walked away.

I stopped, and my Chrome stopped. We watched the old woman marching toward the big doors of the temple, and when she was out of earshot, I heard my lover say, "She wasn't there when Dr. Corvus made the breakthrough."

I swallowed and said, "No?"

"She was called home suddenly. In the middle of the term." My Chrome

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took me by the shoulder and squeezed too hard, telling me, "Her family here, and everywhere else . . . all the Chromatellas in the world were just beginning to die. . . ."

A stupid pesticide was to blame.

It was sold for the first time just after Mother Chrome left for school. It was too new and expensive for most farmers, but the Chromatellas loved it. I can never remember its name: Some clumsy thing full of ethanes and chlorines and phenyl-somethings. Her sisters sprayed it on their fields and their animals, and they ate traces of it on their favorite foods, and after the first summer, a few of the oldest Chromes complained of headaches that began to turn into brain tumors, which is how the plague showed itself.

At first, people considered the tumors to be bad luck.

When Mother Chrome's great and grand died in the same winter, it was called a coincidence, and it was sad. Nothing more.

Not until the next summer did the Plague Bureau realize what was happening. Something in the Chromatella blood wasn't right. The pesticide sneaked into their bodies and brains, and fast-growing tumors would flare up. First in the old, then the very young. The Bureau banned the poison immediately. Whatever was left unused was buried or destroyed. But almost every Chromatella had already eaten and breathed too much of it. When Mother Chrome finally came home, her mother met her at the train station, weeping uncontrollably. Babies were sick, she reported, and all the old people were dying. Even healthy adults were beginning to suffer headaches and tremors, which meant it would all be over by spring. Her mother said that several times. "Over by spring," she said. Then she wiped at her tears and put on a brave Chromatella face, telling her daughter, "Dig your grave now. That's my advice. And find a headstone you like, before they're all gone."

But Mother Chrome never got ill.

"The Institute grew their own food," my Chrome told me.

We were in bed together, warm and happy and in love, and she told the story because it was important for me to know what had happened, and because she thought that I was curious. Even though I wasn't. I knew enough already, I was telling myself.

"They grew their own food," she repeated, "and they used different kinds of pesticides. Safer ones, it turns out."

I nodded, saying nothing.

"Besides," she told me, "Mother spent that summer in the wilderness. She ate clean deer and berries and the like."

"That helped too?" I asked.

"She's never had a sick day in her life," my Chrome assured me. "But after she came home, and for those next few months, she watched everyone else get sicker and weaker. Neighbor communities sent help when they could, but it was never enough. Mother took care of her dying sisters and her mother, then she buried them. And by spring, as promised, it was over. The plague had burnt itself out. But instead of being like the old plagues, where a dozen or fifty of us would survive . . . instead of a nucleus of a town, there was one of us left. In the entire world, there was no one exactly like my mother."

I was crying. I couldn't help but sob and sniffle.

"Mother has lived at home ever since." My Chrome was answering the question that she only imagined I would ask. "Mother felt it was her duty. To make a living, she reopened the old mothering house. A traveler was her

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lover, for a few nights, and that helped her conceive. Which was me. Until my twin sisters were born, I was the only other Chromatella in the world."

And she was my Chrome.

Unimaginably rare, and because of it, precious.

Five sisters and better than a dozen children were waiting inside the temple, sitting together up front, singing loudly for the Solstice.

But the place felt empty nonetheless.

We walked up the long, long center aisle. After a few steps, Mother Chrome was pulling away from us. She was halfway running, while I found myself moving slower. And between us was my Chrome. She looked ahead, then turned and stared at me. I could see her being patient. I could hear her patience. She asked, "What?" Then she drifted back to me, asking again, "What?"

I felt out of place.

Lonely, and lost.

But instead of confessing it, I said, "I'm stupid. I know."

"You are not stupid," she told me. Her patience was fraying away. Too quietly, she said, "What don't you understand? Tell me."

"How can those lizards survive? If half of them are like you say, how do they ever lay enough eggs?"

"Because the eggs they lay have remixed genes," she told me, as if nothing could be simpler. "Every whiptail born is different from every other one. Each is unique. A lot of them are weaker than their parents, sure. But if their world decides to change around them—which can happen in the mountains—then a few of them will thrive."

But the earth is a mild place, mostly. Our sun has always been steady, and our axis tilts only a few degrees. Which was why I had to point out, "God knew what she was doing, making us the way we are. Why would anyone need to change?"

My Chrome almost spoke. Her mouth came open, then her face tilted, and she slowly turned away from me, saying nothing.

The singing had stopped.

Mother Chrome was speaking with a quick quiet voice, telling everyone about the telephone call. She didn't need to explain it to her daughters for them to understand. Even the children seemed captivated, or maybe they were just bored with singing and wanted to play a new game.

My Chrome took one of her sisters downstairs to retrieve the old television.

I sat next to one of the twins, waiting.

There was no confusing her for my Chrome. She had a farmer's hands and solid shoulders, and she was six months pregnant. With those scarred hands on her belly, she made small talk about the fog and the frost. But I could tell that her mind was elsewhere, and after a few moments, our conversation came to a halt.

The television was set up high on the wooden altar, between Winter's haggard face and Spring's swollen belly.

My Chrome found an electrical cord and a channel, then fought with the antenna until we had a clear picture and sound. The broadcast was from Boreal City, from one of the giant All-Family temples. For a moment, I thought there was a mistake. My Chrome was walking toward me, finally ready to sit, and I was thinking that nothing would happen. We would watch the service from Boreal, then have our feast, and everyone would laugh about this very strange misunderstanding.

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Then the temple vanished.

Suddenly I was looking at an old person standing behind a forest of microphones, and beside her, looking young and strange, was a very homely girl.

Huge, she was.

She had a heavy skull, and thick hair sprouted from both her head and her face.

But I didn't say one word about her appearance. I sat motionless, feeling more lost than ever, and my Chrome slid in beside me, and her mother sat beside her.

Everyone in the temple said, "Oh my!" when they saw that ugly girl.

They sounded very impressed and very silly, and I started laughing, then bit down on my tongue.

To the world, the old woman announced, "My name is Corvus. This is my child. Today is her sixteenth birthday."

The pregnant sister leaned and asked her mother, "How soon till we get ours?"

Mother Chrome leaned, and loud enough for everyone to hear, she said, "Very soon. It's already sent."

I asked my Chrome, "What's sent?"

"The pollen," she whispered. "We're supposed to get one of the very first shipments. Corvus promised it to Mother years ago."

What pollen? I wondered.

"I'll need help with the fertilizations," said her mother. "And a physician's hands would be most appreciated."

She was speaking to my Chrome.

On television, the woman was saying, "My child represents a breakthrough. By unlocking ancient, unused genes, then modifying one of her nuclear bodies, we have produced the first of what should be hundreds, perhaps thousands of special children whose duty and honor it will be to prepare us for our future!"

"I'll stay here with you," I promised my Chrome. "As long as necessary."

Then the hairy girl was asked to say something. Anything. So she stepped up to the microphones, gave the world this long, strange smile, then with the deepest, slowest voice that I had ever heard, she said, "Bless us all. I am pleased to serve."

I had to laugh.

Finally.

My Chrome's eyes stabbed at me.

"I'm sorry," I said, not really meaning it. Then I was laughing harder, admitting, "I expected *it* to look prettier. You know? With a nice orange neck, or some brightly colored hair."

My Chrome was staring.

Like never before, she was studying me.

"What's wrong?" I finally asked.

Then I wasn't laughing. I sat up straight, and because I couldn't help myself, I told all the Chromatellas, "I don't care how smart you know you are. What you're talking about here is just plain stupid!"

I said, "Insane."

Then I said, "It's my world, too. Or did you forget that?"

And that's when my Chrome finally told me, "Shut up," with the voice that ended everything. "Will you please, for once, you idiot-bitch, think and *shut up!*" ○

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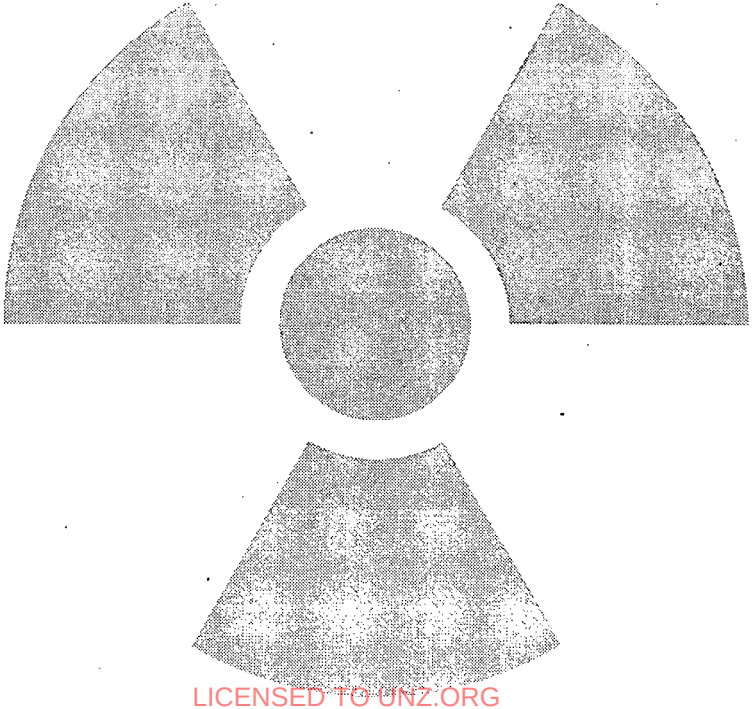
Daniel Marcus

BINDING ENERGY

Daniel Marcus's last story for Asimov's, "Killed in the Ratings," appeared in our January 1997 issue. Life since then has been eventful. He left his career as an applied mathematician at the Lawrence Livermore and Lawrence Berkeley National Labs to join Sage IT Partners, a San Francisco-based consulting company. Even more momentous, his son, David Ernest Marcus, was born on June 5, 1997.



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Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
—John Donne

—There! Stop there!

EMIL'S BBQ. A smiling pig in a clean white apron leans against the Q, brandishing a wicked looking knife. Emil first came here amused at the confluence of names, but he returns for the dark smoky sauce laced with cayenne.

The driver looks at him in the rear view mirror, nods, and pulls into the parking lot. Bits of silica wink like stars in the soft asphalt.

—What can I get for you, sir?

Flat military monotone. Cold eyes, brown like river silt. This driver is new and Emil doesn't like him much. The man is a herring—Emil has tried to engage him in conversation several times, but there has been no response other than the monosyllabic. The Negro makes a good soldier but this one is a lousy chauffeur.

—Stay, stay. I'll go.

He reaches for the door handle, but the driver is too quick. Heat slaps Emil in the face, rising in waves from the asphalt. It is like peering into an oven. Almost immediately, a thin film of perspiration covers his forehead and hands. He slides the cane from his lap and plants it on the pavement. Cut from rough oak, this cane, knotted and polished smooth. His *staff*. His oaken staff. The ground yields slightly under its tip as he heaves himself to his feet. Shakes off the soldier's hand on his elbow.

—Stay, sit.

Familiar stab of pain from his right hip, not exactly an old friend but always there to remind him that he is no longer young, nor even middle-aged.

A handful of tables sprout like linoleum mushrooms under the harsh fluorescence. A man in greasy coveralls and a long, thick pony tail sits next to the window, tearing strips of flesh from the carcass of a chicken, washing it down with deep pulls from a brown long-necked bottle.

The jukebox is playing a plaintive country song about lost love, redolent with pedal-steel and nasal male harmonies. The vinegary barbecue smell makes Emil's stomach rumble; beneath that, a shadow of pain. To hell with the ulcer, he thinks.

—Can I help you, sir?

He looks at the woman behind the counter for the first time. A sudden, hollow silence descends. The smell of burnt wiring fills his nostrils. His mouth opens but he cannot speak.

It is *her*. The traitor. Black eyes bruised with loss, set far apart in a moon-shaped face. Rough olive skin. Coarse, dark curls. Thick lips perpetually poised on the brink of a sneer.

—Sir?

Emil backs up until he bumps into the door. He shoulders it open and spills back into the heat. His limo waits, blinding white, parked astride two spaces.

—Are you all right?

—Yes, yes. Take me to the lab.

Ensconced in the cool dark of the limo, Emil still feels those eyes on him. The years recede like snow under a lit match and he sees her in the Senate

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chambers—1953? 1954? Six months before the executions. She has no shame.

—No, I am not a Communist. No, of course not. Never. Besides, what do I know of nuclear physics?

Ridiculous, Emil thinks. I am an old fool. He raps on the Plexiglas divider.

—Sergeant, back to the barbecue place.

He'll think I'm going senile. Like poor Ronnie.

The driver makes a U-turn, threads back through the wide suburban streets.

The man with the pony tail stares rudely, hunched over bones and scraps. The woman behind the counter affixes a nervous smile to her face.

—Can I help you?

—I'm sorry—you look so much like—tell me, please, what is your name?

She hesitates, looks him over, seems to decide that he is odd but not dangerous.

—Jane. Jane Lucent.

—Not Rabinowicz?

That nervous smile again.

—No. Not Rabinowicz.

Emil sighs. She looks remarkably like her. But it's impossible. The traitor had one daughter who committed suicide in an insane asylum before producing any offspring of her own. That branch of the family tree is kindling.

—No, of course not.

Suddenly, his appetite returns. He looks at the menu posted behind the counter, adorned with garish color photographs, platters of food glistening with grease.

—I'll have the ribs.

Two seasons in California: green and brown. Thirty years here and Emil still longs for the red-and-gold death of autumn, the sharp smell of snow on the air, the distant snap of pond ice breaking under spring's first thaw.

From eight stories up the land acquires definition; tawny prairie ripples with gentle contours like muscles beneath the skin of a great cat. Hundreds of windmills break the ridge line at the edge of the valley. Legacy of the peanut farmer's tax credit. Who not *once* answered Emil's calls, even during that Syria business.

This one is better. At least he sends smiling young men in crisp suits to listen to Emil's ideas. But Emil is still the leprous magician laboring in the castle dungeon, conjuring potions and spells that harness the elemental forces, his ugly visage kept from public view. He has delivered them from a thousand Hells and they treat him like the carrier of a social disease.

Ronnie was the best. Not much of a thinker, but the heart of a lion. Emil loved the visits to the White House, not skulking in through the tunnel but delivered by helicopter to the front lawn. The dreams Emil could spin to a receptive ear!

Glossy photographs of test shots adorn the oiled mahogany walls of his office. Mike, Priscilla, Romeo. Shrimp, Token, Bravo. Emil was the youngest himself, and he knows that a father's favorite child is always his first: Mike. A 10.4 megaton Rube Goldberg nightmare of pipes and gauges, valves and switches, filling a building the size of an airplane hangar. It was a miracle it worked at all, but it vaporized the island of Elugelab and punched a hole in the ocean floor. Emil remembers the light of Creation flashing against the

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high Pacific clouds, minutes later the attenuated shock reaching the observation ships fifty miles out as a stiff, sudden wind. The breath of God.

It was a moment of pure, Wagnerian joy, all his own.

The phone rings, two short bursts. His secretary. He pushes the speaker button.

—Yes?

—Fifteen minutes, sir.

—Ah, yes. Thank you.

It has been a couple of years since he has addressed the Laboratory. Emil feels out of touch with the daily workings of the place. His emeritus status gives him no official power, but he still has allies in the ranks of physicists, particularly X-Division. He can walk over to Building 88 at any time, argue theory with the young, Coke-swilling firebrands, talk politics with Wade, his star disciple.

But every now and then he likes to speak to the rank and file. The *illiterati*. The Laboratory's publicity machinery ensures that the main auditorium in Building 70 will be full; by electronic proxy, his image reaches all corners of the mile-square complex.

Emil could give up this indulgence. Tollbridge is doing a fine job as Director—the ritual Beltway *gavotte,* keeping the Regents happy and uninformed. His insipid Management Chat, twice a month on LabNet. But the guilty pleasure of a captive audience is a powerful drug. And besides, Emil sacrificed everything for this place. The respect of his colleagues, his standing in the scientific community. They loved Oppy so. His big sad eyes. Emil showed them the way, but still they shunned him, saw only his failures. Heat rushes to Emil's cheeks as he recalls the humiliation of the first failed test, a miserable fission firecracker. The flaccid mushroom tickling the tropopause. Ten kilotons, barely a Hiroshima!

The phone rings again. Annoyed at the interruption of his reverie, Emil punches the speaker button.

—What is it?

—Dr. Wade is here, sir.

—Ah, good. Send him in.

Emil's spacious office seems smaller when Wade enters. Six-four, with the ruddy-cheeked enthusiasm of a college athlete, Wade belies the public stereotype of physicist. He is no skinny, bespectacled caricature scuttling beneath a bank of fluorescence from lab bench to computer terminal, clipboard clutched to white-coated breast. With Wade's square jaw and rough good looks, he could pose for L.L. Bean. But he was Emil's finest student. An extraordinary experimentalist and a first-rate theoretician, he wields the ideas and techniques of physics like a carpenter building a house. No, not a carpenter, a blacksmith—the forge and the anvil are metaphors more suited to the manipulation and control of the elemental forces. For the last decade, he has been—methodically, surreptitiously—stripping Emil of authority in the Lab hierarchy. Or trying to. Emil plays along. He admires Wade's feral cunning. His own position in the history books is secure. Besides, the old magician still has a few tricks up his sleeve.

—Emil. You are looking fit.

—You are a liar, John.

Wade eases his big frame into the leather chair in front of Emil's desk, set slightly lower than Emil's own. As usual, he wastes no time.

—What are you going to talk about?

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Emil was expecting this. Make sure the old man isn't going to violate national security in his enthusiasm for a good yarn.

—The usual. State of the Lab. Current funding cycle. I thought I'd drop a hint or two about Diamond Prism.

Emil watches with amusement as Wade's jaw clenches.

—I, um, don't think that would be a very good idea. Weintraub from the *Herald* is going to be there—he already thinks you're the anti-Christ. Diamond Prism is entirely black budget right now . . .

Emil holds his hand up, palm forward, as if directing traffic.

—Relax, John. I just wanted to see whether you actually think I'm incontinent.

A frown creases Wade's smooth forehead.

—Incompetent.

—I beg your pardon?

Wade opens his mouth, closes it.

—Never mind.

The two men are silent. The room fills with ambient sounds—a white noise air-conditioner hum, the distant ringing of a phone, the electronic squeal of a fax machine in the outer office.

—I'll be out of your hair soon enough, John. I am an old man.

He leans toward Wade, lowers his voice.

—I am sure you don't know this, but Tollbridge is being groomed for Secretary.

The gratuitous improvisation rolls off Emil's tongue like a dollop of oil. Wade's eyebrows raise.

—Ah, yes, I knew that would get your attention. I still have sources inside the Beltway. We could bring Collins up to take over X-Division and put you in as Director.

Wade rubs his chin thoughtfully.

—Collins isn't ready. The Oberon shoot had lousy energy density. . . .

—Engineering, John. It's just engineering. What you're really saying is that *you're* not ready, yes? To give up your little fiefdom.

Wade laughs, a short, barking sound.

—I'm ready.

The auditorium in Building 70 is full, a restless sea of silvery-haired heads. Emil scans the crowd for younger faces and sees a few, but not many. The old man is a circus act and they have no time. He limps down the center aisle—*step, thump, step, thump*—his staff making a hollow sound on the deep pile carpet. They have wheeled out an old upright piano for him and without preamble, he mounts the stairs at the side of the stage and seats himself with his back to the audience.

Where did they dig this thing up? The wood is pitted and scarred; there is a neat, black chevron of cigarette burns to the left of the music holder. Cigarette burns! He hopes the piano is tuned, at least.

Suddenly his hands feel huge and clumsy; his arthritic knuckles are golf-ball sized knots of pain. His breathing quickens and a flicker of agony lashes up from his sciatic nerve. He was going to play a little Bach, a little Mozart, but that mathematical precision seems out of reach. Stupid indulgence! It's all out of reach.

Without thinking, he launches into the Promenade from "Pictures at an Exhibition." He hates the acoustics in this room—the ceiling baffles turn all

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sound into a homogeneous, milky paste. The power of the stately opening is muffled and compressed. Remembering suddenly the demands of the next movement, "The Gnome," Emil feels something tighten across his forehead and a spastic tremble flows down his arms and out his fingertips. The missed note hangs in the air like a fart.

—Shit.

The word echoes in his ears and he realizes that his lapel mike is on.

Cheeks burning, he stumbles through another couple of movements. Each time he returns to the refrain it is a little more uncertain, a little more out of tempo. Finally he just stops. Breathes. His shoulders sag as if something has left his body.

A tenuous vapor of whispers rises from the crowd. Somebody applauds. Someone else. A weak, uncertain ripple surges and dies.

Emil takes a deep breath, leans on his staff. Stands and turns around.

—Poor Mussourgsky.

A few nervous laughs.

—A simple demonstration of *quid pro quo*. I just did to Russia what they did to us for forty-five years.

More laughter. Another scattering of applause and it catches this time, fills the hall, fills Emil.

He's got them.

—Imagine, if you will, the following scenario. Yeltsin has a fatal heart attack. In the ensuing chaos, the hard-liners prevail. There is a coup, perhaps bloodless, perhaps not, and the Russian government is in their hands. Our intelligence tells us that Lebed—or somebody—will be addressing a huge crowd in Red Square. With only a few minutes notice, one of our deep patrol submarines in the Pacific launches a missile. It pops up into a low ballistic trajectory and, at the peak of the parabola, a low-yield thermonuclear device is detonated in close proximity to a long, thin rod of metallic foam. Computers have aligned the rod to within a micron's tolerance so that its aim is as true as the resolve in our own hearts. Microseconds before the rod is vaporized, a highly energized beam lances out of the blue, Russian sky. Lebed, and the hopes of the hard-liners, are now a rapidly expanding plasma.

Emil scans the crowd. He recognizes Weintraub, scribbling furiously on a small notepad. And there, Habermas, a protégé of Wade's, with a pained look on his young face.

—Terrorism, insurgency, and financial instability are the threats that will shadow us as we move into the twenty-first century. In order to maintain our position as leaders of the Free World, we must pursue an aggressive policy of surgical countermeasures. *Surgical countermeasures.*

The repeated phrase fills the hall, pregnant with possibility. He relishes for a moment that unfolding, then continues. He does not mention Diamond Prism directly, but he lays it out, all of it. Wade will be furious, probably try to pull Emil's clearance. But it's the right thing to do. The right time. Back in Ronnie's administration they used to come from Washington like dogs to a bitch in heat. The Congressmen and their dull, eager staffers. The spooks. The generals. Everybody but the scientists. From a distant nexus within, he sees himself, a gnarled, stooped gnome standing before a lectern, spinning candied lies to an audience of idiot children. And looking out into the crowd, he sees her.

Dark hair falling like wings across her face, not quite hiding her bruised eyes. It *is* her. The close air in the auditorium is suddenly charged with an ozone stink. The hot smell of metal on metal. Solder and sulfur. Burning rubber.

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He reaches out a hand. His staff clatters to the floor of the stage.

—*You.*

A susurrus rises from the crowd, like the cicada-hiss of summer. Emil staggers back, grabs the lectern for support, lurches into the wings. Sees the red EXIT sign. Pushes into the dry, sweltering heat.

—Take me home.

Curt military nod in the rear view mirror. Emil sits back in the soft leather, breathes, watches the temporary buildings at the outskirts of the Lab segue to grape fields and tract housing locked in a Darwinian tangle for dominance of the sun-baked prairie.

The air conditioning is on high but he can't stop sweating. His shirt is drenched, plastered to his skin. Sharp, transient pains from his chest call to him like voices from the bottom of a deep well. He wonders if he is going to have a heart attack, a stroke, a breakdown.

He opens the small refrigerator in front of him and pulls out a bottle of spring water, changes his mind and from the freezer withdraws a slim flask of vodka. It goes down like liquid metal. Emil sees the driver looking at him in the rear-view as he tilts the flask back with shaking hands. The military lack of affect is a perfect vehicle for the contempt Emil knows is there. Emil presses a button in the armrest and an upholstered panel rises from the seat back, separating him from the driver's compartment

The phone trills at him from the armrest. Wade, no doubt, or Tollbridge. Let it ring. Emil leans back and closes his eyes.

Immediately her face begins to coalesce on the dark screen of his closed eyelids, taking shape from nothing until she is hovering before him, clear as a photograph. Her head is shaved and she is wearing a starchy, green prison shift. The cell behind her is a Caligari nightmare of distorted angles and false perspective.

—Why are you here? What do you want?

She does not respond.

Two guards appear, dressed in head to foot black with loose black hoods. They escort her through twisting stone tunnels lit by naked bulbs. Disembodied, powerless, Emil follows, like a balloon bobbing on the end of a string.

They come to a high-ceilinged room dominated by a large wooden chair. Metal cuffs decorate the arms and legs. Black-sheathed cables sprout from the chair and converge to a thick bundle that leads to a panel in the far wall. At one end, onlookers fill a row of bleacher-like seats. Emil recognizes J. Edgar and Roy, Ike and Nixon, Joe McCarthy.

One of the guards straps her to the chair; the other walks to the panel and places his hand on a large switch. When he sees his partner step away from the chair, without preamble he yanks downward. Her body stiffens, convulses, dances in the restraints.

Emil jerks awake with a start. The phone is ringing again. Laced with the chemical smell of the air conditioning is the stink of ozone and burnt wiring.

She is next to him in the cool dark of the limo, regarding him with wide, bruised eyes.

He slides away from her, pressing himself against the door.

—What do you want from me?

She puts her hand on his. Her touch is dry ice, burning cold.

—We were all so frightened, Emil.

—You betrayed your country. You deserved what you got.

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She closes her eyes, breathes, opens them, says nothing.

—What do you want? Why *now?*

—You are dying, Emil. Your medical appointment next week will reveal a shadow on your left lung. Further tests will reveal that it has already metastasized. A chain reaction, eh? Filling your body with the light of Creation.

It is true. He can feel it. Something cold takes hold of his stomach and squeezes, hard.

—You come to gloat, then, to see me fall apart. I won't give you the satisfaction. I am not afraid of God. I have met Him on His own terms.

She shakes her head sadly.

—No, Emil, not to gloat.

—What then?

She says nothing. Just looks at him with those eyes. Like Oppy at Princeton, days before he died. His body, rail-thin in health, wasted away to nothing. The cancer had eaten away his larynx so he could not speak, but he was fully alert. He took Emil's hand in his and his hands were warm and strong.

Emil fumbled for words.

—Perhaps I should not have come.

Oppy shook his head, squeezed Emil's hand. Emil met his eyes for the first time and recoiled at the expression. Not the loathing he expected that would allow him to gloat privately at his adversary's demise, but a preternatural serenity. Compassion. Forgiveness. Emil pulled his hand away and fled into the hollow winter morning.

He feels himself being drawn into her eyes, wide like Oppy's, all-encompassing. Feels unseen tidal forces pulling, as if he is nearing the event horizon of a black hole.

He looks away, slaps the intercom button.

—Driver. Pull over.

Rattle of pebbles against the undercarriage as the limo comes to a halt on the shoulder of the highway. The limo shudders as a large truck passes.

Emil looks to his side again and she is gone; the burnt electrical smell hangs in the air like a Cheshire grin.

He opens the door and steps out into the heat.

—Sir?

Emil gestures the driver back inside. The wake from another passing truck tugs at his suit. The shoulder of the highway is scattered with debris—a hubcap, glittering shards of amber glass, the decomposing corpse of a dog. Emil staggers down the embankment into the prairie scrub. The burning sun is pinned to the sky's blue arch, a white, curdled eye. Behind him in the limo, the phone begins to ring. O

—for Carter Scholz

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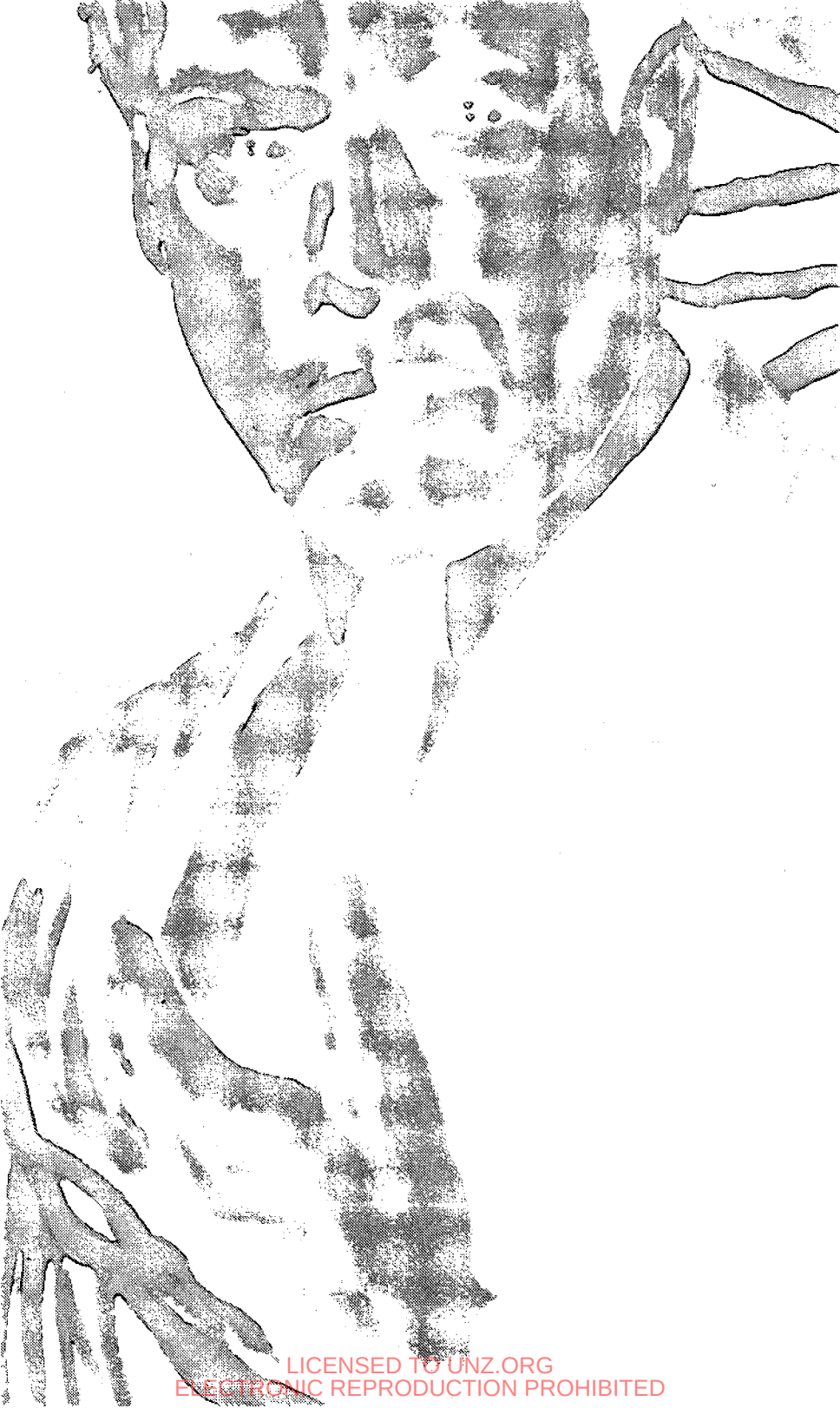

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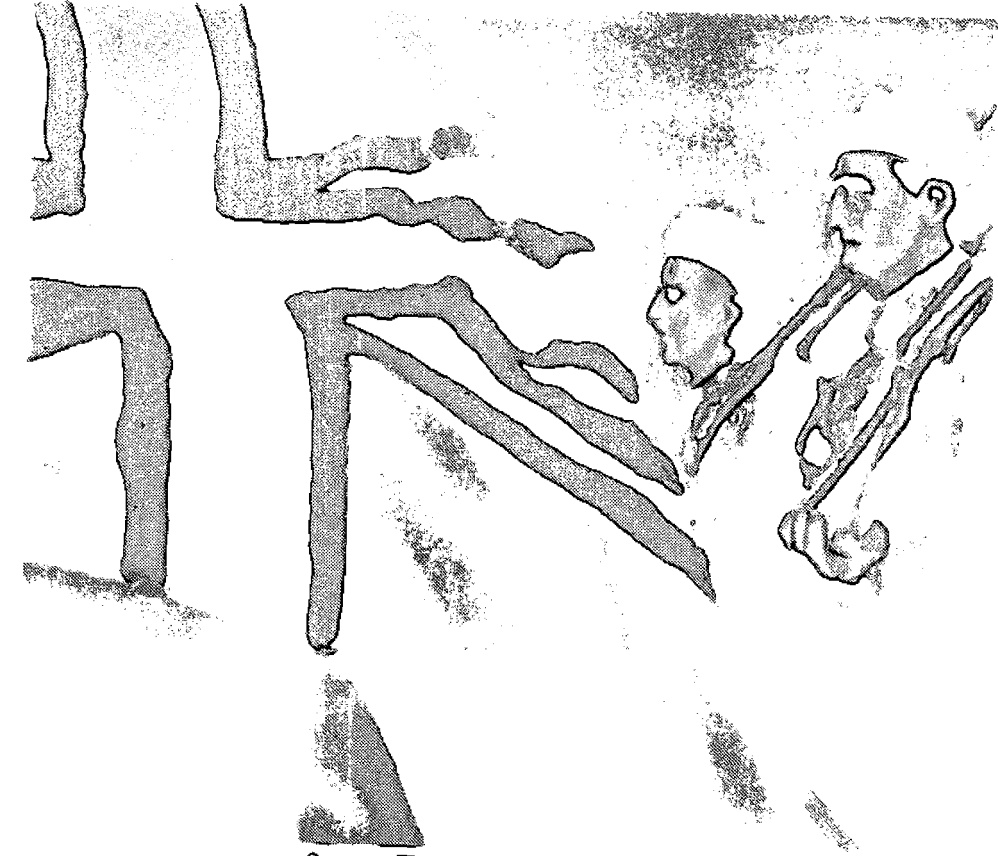

Ian R. MacLeod

In his brilliant new story, a shift in the outcome of The Great War leads to a chilling tale of an England that casts a dark and terrifying cloud over . . .

THE SUMMER ISLES

Illustration by Steven Cavallo

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One

On this as on almost every Sunday evening, I find a message from my acquaintance on the wall of the third cubicle of the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow. It's two thumbnails dug into the sleek green paint this week, which means the abandoned shed by the allotments past the rugby grounds in half an hour's time. A trail of other such marks run across the cubicle wall; what amounts nowadays to my entire sexual life. Here—Oh, happy, dangerous days!—is the special triple-mark that meant a back room in the hotel of a sympathetic but understandably wary proprietor. He's gone now, of course, has Larry Black, like so many others. Quietly taken one night for the shocks and needles of the treatment centers in the Isle of Man.

I pull the chain, clunk back the lock, and step out into the sweet Jeyes Fluid air. Placed above me on the wall as I wash my hands, with what, if you didn't know this country, you would surely imagine to be ironic intent, hangs a photograph of John Arthur. He gazes warmly across his desk, looking younger than his forty-nine years despite his grey hair. The photograph is brass-framed, well-polished. Of course, no one has dared to deface it.

Outside along St. Giles, twilight has descended, yet the warmth of this early summer day remains. A convoy of trucks lumbers around the cobbles, filled with bewildered-looking conscripts on their way to the sprawling camps in the southeast of England. A few of the newer or expensively refurbished pubs already boom with patriotic songs. I pause to relight my pipe as I pass St. John's, then lean spluttering against a wall and cough up out a surprising quantity of stringy phlegm, watched over by a small but disapproving gargoyle. Odd, disgusting, habit—hawking and spitting. Something that, until recently, I'd only associated with old men.

There's still some life out on the playing fields. Undergrads are wandering. There are groups. Couples. Limbs entwine. Soft laughter flowers. The occasional cigarette flares. Glancing back at the towers of this city laid in shadows of hazy gold against the last flush of the sun, it's all so impossibly beautiful. It looks, in fact, exactly like an Empire Alliance poster. **Greater Britain Awake!** I smile at the thought, and wonder for a moment if there isn't some trace of reality still left in the strange dream that we in this country now seem to be living. Turning, sliding my hand into my pocket to nurse the encouraging firmness of my anticipatory erection, I cross the bridge over the Cherwell as Old Tom begins his long nightly chime.

Despite all the back-to-nature and eat-your-own greens propaganda that Home Secretary Mosley has been peddling, the shed at the far end of the allotments and the plots it once served remain abandoned, cupped as they are in a secret hollow, lost by the men who went to the War and never came back again. I lever open the door and duck inside. Tools and seeds and sweet dry manure. But no sign yet of my acquaintance as the floorboards creak beneath my feet. The darkness, even as my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, becomes near-absolute as night settles outside. A distant bell ripples a muffled shipwreck clang. The late train to London rattles by in the distance, dead on time.

My acquaintance is late. In fact, he should have been here first. As I pushed back the door, his younger arms should already have been around me. He trembles often as not when we first lock together, does my acquaintance. After all, he has so much more to lose. For, despite the darkness and the secrecy with which we pretend to cloak our meetings, I know exactly who

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my acquaintance is. I have studied the lights of his house shining through the privet that he trims so neatly each fortnight, and I have watched the welcoming faces of his wife and two daughters as they greet him at his door.

Checking, occasionally, the radium glow of my watch, I let a whole hour slide by as the residues of early hope and fear sour into disappointment, and then frank anxiety. But what, after all, do I know of the demands of being a father, a husband? Of working in some grim dead-end section of the Censor's Department of the Oxford City Post Office? At ten, I lever the shed door open and step back out into the summer night, leaving my long-forgotten libido far behind me. The stars shine down implacably through the rugby H's as I make my way past lovers and drunks and dog walkers into the old alleys. I turn for a moment as I hear the whisper of footsteps. Could that be a figure, outlined against the mist of light that seeps from a doorway? But by the time I've blinked, it becomes nothing—an aging man's fancy: the paranoias of love and fear.

Then quickly along Holywell where an owl calls, and onward under the plane trees to my college and my quad, to the cool waiting sheets of my room deep in the serene heart of this ancient city.

I open my eyes next morning to the sight of my scout Christlow bearing a tray containing a steaming pot of Assam, a rack of toast, my own special jar of marmalade. Even as the disappointments of the previous evening and the cold aches that have suddenly started to assail my body wash over me, I still have to smile to find myself here.

"Lovely morning, sir." Christlow drifts through diamonds of sunlight to place the tray astride my lap. The circled cross of the EA badge on his lapel winks knowingly at me. "Oh, by the way, sir. You asked me to remind you of your appointment today."

"Appointment?"

"At ten o'clock, you were seeing your doctor. Unless, of course, you've—"

"—No. Yes." I nod in my pajamas, what's left of my hair sticking up in a grey halo, a dribble of spilt tea warming my chin—all in all, a good approximation of an absent-minded don. "Thank you, Christlow, for reminding me."

In that scarily deferential way of his, Christlow almost bows, then retreats and closes the door. With a sound like distant thunder, his trolley trundles off down the oak-floored corridor. And yes, I truly had forgotten my appointment. The dust-spangled sunlight that threads my room now seems paler and my throat begins to ache as whispers of pain and uncertainty come into my head.

Walking along High Street an hour later, I have to squeeze my way through the queue outside the Regal for the day's first showing of Olivier's *Henry V*. Many, like Christlow, wear EA badges. But all ages, all types, both sexes, every age and disability, are gathered. A mixture, most bizarrely of all, of town and gown—undergrads and workers—the two quite separate existences that Oxford so grudgingly contains.

Beyond the junction of Alfred Street I push through the little door beside the jewelers and climb the stairs to the surgery. The receptionist looks up without smiling, then returns to stabbing a finger at her typewriter. The posters in this poky waiting room are like the ones you see everywhere nowadays. **With Your Help We Can Win. Now Is The Time. Join the Empire Alliance—Be a Part of the Modernist Revolution.** There's a fetching

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painting of the towers and spires of this great dreaming city aglow at sunset, much as I saw them yesterday. And, of course, there's John Arthur.

"Mr. Brook. Doctor Parker will see you."

I push through the doorway, blinking. Doctor Parker is totally new to me. Fresh-faced, young, and pinkly bald, he looks, in fact, almost totally new to himself. I have no one but myself to blame for taking my chances with the National Health Service. I could have availed myself of Doctor Reichard, who comes to our college every Wednesday to see to us dons, and is available at most other times, since, on the basis of a stipend granted by George I in 1715, these attendances comprise his sole professional duty. But my complaints—shortness of breath, this cough, the odd whispering that sometimes comes upon me, the growing ache in my bones—sound all too much like the simple ravages of age. And I nurse, also, a superstitious fear that my sexual leanings will be apparent to the trained medical eye.

"Sorry about this ah . . . I've only just got . . . ," he says as he glances down at his page-a-day calendar. **Thursday 13 June 1940.** The letters seem to glow, so brightly rainbowed at their edges that I wonder if this isn't some other new symptom. "You're the ah . . . The columnist, aren't you? What was it? 'The Fingers of History'?"

"'Figures of History.'"

"Of course. *Daily Sketch,* every Saturday. Used to find it handy at school." Then another thought strikes him. "And you knew him, didn't you? I mean, you knew John Arthur . . ."

"That was a long time ago."

"But what's he *really* like?"

I open my mouth to give my usual noncommittal reply. But it doesn't seem worth it.

"Here we are." He shuffles the X-rays into order, then leans over the file. "Um—*Griffin Brooke.* I thought it was Geoffrey, and Brook without the e?"

"It's a sort of pen-name," I say, although in fact the *Oxford Calendar,* the door to my rooms—even the name tags Christlow sews into my gowns—also read Geoffrey Brook. Griffin Brooke, the names I was born with, now resides only in odd corners such as this, where, despite the potential for confusion, I find myself reluctant to give them up.

As my thoughts drift toward all the odd accidents in life that have brought me here—and how, indeed, Fingers of History would be a good description of some historical process or other—another part of me watches Doctor Parker as he then raises the cover of my file a few inches to peer sideways into it.

Something changes behind his eyes. But when he clears his throat and smoothes back down the papers and finally makes the effort to meet my gaze, I'm still certain that I'm fully prepared for the worst. What could be more terrible, after all, than growing old, or emphysema, bronchitis, tuberculosis . . . ?

"It seems," he begins, "that a tumor has been growing in your lungs. . . . Outwardly, you're still in good enough health, but I really doubt if there's point in an operation."

Not even any need for an operation! A stupid bubble of joy rises up from my stomach, then dissolves.

I lick my lips. "How long," I ask, "have I got?"

"You'll need to make plans. I'm so terribly sorry. . . ."

Thrust upon the gleaming linoleum rivers of the new NHS, I am kept so busy at first that there is little time left for anything resembling worry.

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There are further X-rays at the Radcliffe, thin screens behind which I must robe and disrobe for the benefit of cold-fingered but sympathetic men who wear half-moon glasses. Nurses provide me with over-sweet tea and McVitie's Digestives. Porters seek my opinion about Arsenal's chances in the FA Cup.

I feel almost heroic. And for a while I am almost grateful for the new impetus that my condition gives to a long-planned project of mine. A book not of history, but *about* history. One which examines, much as a scientist might examine the growth of a culture, the way that events unfold, and attempts to grapple with the forces that drive them. *The Fingers of History?* The odd way that inspiration sometimes arrives when you're least looking for it, I may even have stumbled upon a title; serious and relevant to the subject, yet punning at the same time on my own small moment of popular fame in the *Daily Sketch.*

After years of grappling with the sense of being an impostor that has pervaded most of my life, I suddenly find that I am making good progress in writing the pivotal chapter about Napoleon. Was he a maker of history, or was he its servant? Of course, he was both—and yet it is often the little incidents, when history is approached from this angle, which stand large. Questions such as, what would have happened if his parents Carlo and Letizia had never met?—which normal historians would discount as ridiculous—suddenly become a way of casting new light.

But one post-hospital afternoon a week or so later, as I huddle over my desk, and the warm air drifting through my open window brings the chant and the tread of Christlow and his fellow EA members parading on the ancient grass of our college quad, the whole process suddenly seems meaningless. Now, I can suddenly see the futility of all the pages I have written. I can see, too, the insignificant and easily filled space that my whole life will soon leave. A few clothes hanging in a wardrobe, an old suitcase beneath a bed, some marks on a toilet cubicle wall. Who, after all, am I, and what possible difference does it make?

Pulling on my jacket, empty with fear, I head out into Oxford as evening floods in.

I was born in Lichfield—which, then as now, is a town that calls itself a city—in the year 1880. It's middle England, neither flat nor hilly, north or south. Barring Doctor Johnson being born and a messy siege in the Civil War, nothing much has ever happened there. My father worked for Lichfield Corporation before he died of a heart attack one evening while tending his allotment. He'd had a title that changed once or twice amid great glory and talk of more ambitious holidays, but he'd always been Assistant-this and Deputy-that—one of the great busy-but-unspecified ("Well, it's quite hard to explain what I do unless you happen to be in the same line yourself . . .") who now so dominate this country.

My mother and I were never that stretched; we had his pension and his life insurance, and she took on a job working at Hindley's cake shop, and brought home bits of icing and angelica for me when they changed the window display. By this time, I'd already decided I wanted to be "a teacher." Until I passed into Secondary School from Stowe Street Elementary, I was always one of the brightest in my class. Even a County Scholarship to Rugby seemed within reach. And from there, yes, I was already dreaming of the Magdalene Deer, sleek bodies bathing in the Cherwell at Parson's Pleasure.

My later years in school, though, were a slog. Partly from struggling to keep pace among cleverer lads, I fell ill with something that may or may not

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have been scarlet fever. On my long stay away from school, a boy called Martin Dawes would call in each afternoon to deliver books and sit with me. Whilst up in my room, he would sometimes slip his hands beneath the waistband of my pajamas and toss me off, as if that, too, was a message that needed to be delivered from school. Of course, I was deeply grateful. After I had recovered, locked in the upstairs toilet with its ever-open window as my mother shuffled about in the kitchen, I would dutifully try to incorporate women into my pink imaginings as, in the absence of Martin's attentions, I stimulated myself. But at some vital moment, their chests would always flatten and their groins would engorge as they stepped toward me, cropped and clean and shining.

That, in the personal history of what I term my pre-Francis days, is the sole extent of my sexual development. There was just me, my guilty semi-celibacy, and helping my mother look after her house, and watching the lads I'd known at school grow up, leave home, marry, start families. I had, by my early twenties, also come to accept my position as a Second Class Teacher for the Senior Standard Threes at Burntwood Charity. In the articles with which I began my short career in the *Daily Sketch* nearly thirty years later, I gave the impression that John Arthur was one of my brightest and most ambitious pupils there, a little comet trail across the pit-dusty Burntwood skies. Thanks to numerous flowery additions by the *Sketch's* copy editor, I also stated that he was pale-skinned, quiet, good-looking, intense, and that he possessed a slight West Country accent, this being the time before it had changed to the soft Yorkshire that we all know now—all traits that would have got him a good beating up in the playground—and that, "on summer evenings after school when the pit whistle had blown and the swallows were wheeling," he and I would walk up into "the hazy Staffordshire hills" and sit down and gaze down at "the spires of Lichfield, the pit wheels of Burntwood, and the smokestacks of Rugeley from the flowing purple heather." Now, after all these years of practice, this has become my party act. So, yes, John Arthur really is there in that classroom at Burntwood Charity with the smell of chalk dust and unwashed bodies. His hand is raised from the third row of desks to ask a more than usually pertinent question before I start to ramble on about one of my many pet subjects. That is how I recall him.

Too weary to stop, trailing cigarette smoke, memories, abstractions, I wander Oxford's new suburban streets, passing illuminated porches bearing individual name-plates; **Church House. Dawric. The Willows.** It's quiet now, although scarcely past nine and only just getting fully dark. The houses have a sleepy look. Their curtains are drawn. Faintly, like the movement of ghosts, I can see the flicker of television screens in many darkened lounges.

A footstep scuffs in the street behind me, and the sound is so furtive and unexpected that I turn and look back, although there was nothing to see. I walk on more briskly. Beyond a patch of grass where **Ball Games Are Prohibited** lies the home of my acquaintance, with its black-and-white gable, the privet, and the long strip of drive that, in these days of ever-growing prosperity, will probably soon be graced with a Morris Ladybird "people's car" instead of his Raleigh bicycle. But the windows of the house are darkened, uncurtained. And there is something odd about the look of them . . .

My feet crunch on something sharper than gravel as I walk up the path to my acquaintance's front door. Many of the windows in the bay are shattered, there is a pervasive, summery smell of children's urine, and a fat iron pad-

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lock has been fitted across the door's splintered frame. I see, last of all, the sign that the Oxford Constabulary have pasted across the bricks in the porch. **Take Notice Hereby . . .** but this sky is incredibly dark and deep for summer, and I can't read further than the Crown-embossed heading. I slump down on the doorstep, scattering empty milk bottles, covering my face with my hands. Suddenly, it all comes to me. This. Death. Everything.

When I look up some time later, a figure is standing watching me from the suburban night with her arms folded, head tilted, a steely glint of curlers. "I'm Mrs. Stevens," she tells me, offering a softly companionable hand to help me up, then leading me past the hedge and the dustbins into the brightness of her kitchen next door. Slumped at the table, I watch her as she boils the kettle and warms the pot.

"I know," she says. "This must be a shock to you . . ."

"They took them *all* away?"

"All of them. The pity of it really." She stirs her tea and passes me mine. "Them young girls."

"Nobody did anything to stop it?"

She gazes across at me, and licks the brown line of tea that's gathered on her small mustache. "I'll tell you what they were like, Mr. Brook. In every way, I'd have said, they were a decent couple. Only odd thing I remember now is they sometimes used to leave the light on without drawing the curtains so you could see right in. . . . The lassies were nice, though. Fed our cat for us when we went up to Harrogate last year. Knew them well yourself, did you?"

"He was just an acquaintance. But when they came to the house, was it the KSG or did—"

"—and you'd never have known, would you, to look at her?"

"*Her?* You mean . . . ?"

"Ah . . ." Mrs. Stevens slaps her hand flat down on the table and leans forward, her brown eyes gleaming. "So you still don't know the truth of it? Her real name was something Polish. All Zs and Ks." She hurrumphs. "It's understandable that they *want* to come, isn't it? Just as long as they don't make themselves a burden, earn a decent living, talk like we do and don't bother our children and keep themselves to themselves."

"So what was the problem?"

"She was a Jew, wasn't she. All these years they've been living next door and acting all normal and hiding it from us." Mrs. Stevens raises her shoulders and shudders theatrically. "To think of it. It's the *dishonesty*. And her nothing but a dirty little Jew."

Two

Clouds sweep in across Oxford, thick and grey as wet cement. Rain brims over the low surrounding hills and washes away the hope of what had promised to be another spectacular summer. In the whitewashed yard of the town prison on a hissing grey dawn, two men are hanged for their part in an attempted mail robbery. In Honduras, the British prefix lost to revolution in 1919 is restored in a bloody coup. A car bomb in the Trans-Jordan kills fifteen German League of Nations soldiers. In India, as ever, there are uprisings and massacres, and I despair as I work on my book of ever making any sense of history. It seems, to quote Gibbon, little more than a register of cruelties, follies, and misfortunes.

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In Britain, the Jews have always been small in number, and we've generally been "tolerant." Before the rise of Modernism, my acquaintance and his family probably had little more to fear from exposure than the occasional human turd stuffed through their letter box. After all, Jewishness isn't like homosexuality, madness, criminality, communism, militant Irishness: they can't exactly *help* being born with their grabby disgusting ways, can they? Rather like the gypsies, you see, we didn't mind them *living,* but not here, not with *us*. . . . In this as in so many other areas, all Modernism did when John Arthur came to power was take what people said to each other over the garden fence and turn it into Government policy.

I can well remember the *Homeland for British Jewry* newsreels: they were probably one of the defining moments of early Greater British history. There they were, the British Jews. Whole eager families of them helped by smiling Tommies as they climbed from landing craft and hauled their suitcases up onto the shingle of remote Scottish islands that had been empty but for a few sheep since the Clearances of a century before. And it was hard not to think how genuinely nice it would be to start afresh somewhere like that, to paint and make homely the grey blocks of those concrete houses, to learn the skills of shepherding, harvesting, fishing.

So many other things have happened since then that it has been easy to forget about the Jews. I remember a short piece on Pathé before Disney's *Snow White* in what must have been 1939. By then they looked rustic and sunburned, their hands callused by cold winters of weaving and dry-stone walling, their eyes bright from the wind off the sea. Since then, nothing. A blank, an empty space that I find hard to fill even in my imagination.

One morning as thunder crackles and water streams and the whole college seems to shift and creak like a ship straining at its moorings, I'm still marooned in my rooms, ill and lost in the blind alley of my book when Christlow arrives at eleven to do the cleaning.

"You know the Jews, Christlow," I chirp after clearing my throat.

"Jews sir? Yes sir. Although not personally."

He pauses in his dusting. The situation already has a forced air.

"I was wondering—it's part of my book, you see—what happened to the mixed families. Where a Jew married a gentile . . ."

"I'm sure they were treated sympathetically, sir. Although for the life of me I can't imagine there was ever very many of them."

"Of course," I nod, and force my gaze back to my desk. Christlow resumes his dusting, his lips pursed in a silent whistle amid the rain-streaming shadows as he lifts the photos along the mantelpiece of my mother, my father—and a good-looking, dark-haired young man.

"So you'll be all right, then, sir?" he asks when he's finished, picking up his box of rags and polishes. "Fine if I leave you now?"

"Thank you, Christlow. As always," I add, laying it on thick for some reason, as if there's a deeper debt that he and I owe each other, "you've done a splendid job."

When he's gone and his footsteps have faded into the college's loose stirrings, I slide in the bolt, then cross to the gloom of my bedroom and drag my old suitcase from beneath the bed. I always keep its key in my pocket, but the hinges creak as I open them, rusty from disuse. Nothing inside has changed. The tin toys. The tennis slacks. The exercise book with the name **Francis Eveleigh** inscribed into the cardboard cover in thick childish letters. A school badge. A Gillette safety razor—his first? A pistol wrapped inside an old rag. A

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decent-enough herringbone jacket. A single shoe. A steel hip flask. A soldier's pass for 14-26 September 1916, cross-stamped **No Longer Valid**. Various socks and old-fashioned collarless shirts and itchy-looking undies. A copy of Morris's *News from Nowhere*. And a Touring Map of the Scottish Highlands, folded so often that the sheets threaten to break apart as I touch them.

I grab a handful of his clothes and bury my face into them, smelling Oxford damp, Oxford stone, Four Square Ready-Rubbed and Mansion House lavender floor polish. Little enough is left of Francis now. Still, that faint scent of his flesh like burnt lemon. A few dark strands of his hair . . .

What a joke I have become. My sole claim to fame is having dimly known a great man when he was still a child, and my sole claim to happiness lies almost as far back; a miracle that happened for a few days nearly thirty years ago. I suppose I've convinced myself since that homosexuals cannot really love—it's easier that way. And yet at the same time, in all the years since, Francis had always been with me.

"It really doesn't matter, Griff," I hear him say as his fingers touch my neck. He smells not of lemons now, but of the rainy oak he's been standing beneath as he watches my window from the quad. But he hasn't aged. He hasn't changed.

"No, it doesn't matter at all," he whispers as he turns me round to kiss me. "Not any of this. That's the secret of everything."

I smile to find him near me, and still shudder at the cool touch of his hands. In the moment before the thunder crackles closer over Oxford and I open my eyes, all pain is gone.

Ernie Svendsen, with his suspiciously foreign name, his long nose, his thick glasses, seems an unlikely survivor of my kind. He puts it down to something that he has on Oxford's Deputy Chief Constable, although I would have thought that would have made him a prime candidate for a hit-and-run car accident.

We meet at a park bench the next afternoon, during a break in the rain.

"Do you think they'll let them stay together?" I ask as he tosses bread from a brown paper bag to the feathered carpet of ducks that have gathered around us. "Will they send him to the Isle of Man, the girls and the mother to the Western Isles?"

Giving me a pitying look, Ernie shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that, my friend. Oh, they'll get it out of him. He'll tell them anything—lies or the truth. People always blab on so when you threaten them. . . . I shouldn't worry," he adds, seeing the expression on my face. "If something was going to happen to you, it would have happened already. Being who you are, I'm sure you'll be safe."

"I'm not who I am. I'm not anybody."

"Then you're doubly lucky."

"I keep asking myself what the point is. I mean—why?"

"I think you've forgotten what it's like, my friend."

"What?"

"Being the way we are—bent, queer. The guilt. The stupid scenes. You remember those leaflets, the promises of help, that we could be cured. Don't tell me you didn't secretly get hold of one. " He sighs. "If we could just press some button—pull out something inside us—don't you think we'd all do it? Wouldn't you take that chance, if you were given it? Isn't John Arthur right in that respect—and wouldn't the Jews feel the same?"

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But to change would mean re-living my life—becoming something other than what I am. Losing Francis. So I shake my head. And I've heard the stories of what happens to my kind. The drugs. The electrodes. The dirty pictures. Swimming in pools of your own piss and vomit. *That* kind of treatment that was available even before Modernism made it compulsory. "It isn't John Arthur," I say. "It's all of us. It's Britain . . ."

Ernie chuckles. "I suppose you'll be alone now, won't you?"

"Alone?"

"Without companionship. Without a cock to suck."

I glance across the bench, wondering if Ernie's propositioning me. But his eyes behind his glasses are as far away as ever; fish in some distant sea. Sex for him, I suspect, has always been essentially a spectator sport. That's why he fits in so well. That's why he's survived. He doesn't want a real body against him. All he needs is the sharp hot memories of those he's betrayed.

"Look," I say, "I just thought you might have some information about what happens to . . . to the Jews—and to people like us. Surely somebody has to?"

"All I know is what I read in the papers, my friend. And what I see in the newsreels." His gaze travels across the silvered lawns. "I understand how it is. We're only human, after all. It's always sad when you lose someone. . . ."

He stands up, shaking the last of his breadcrumbs over the ducks, and I watch as he walks off, splashing a short cut across the lawns and then around the sodden nets of the empty tennis courts. I can't help wondering if there will be a black official KSG Rover waiting for me somewhere soon. The polite request and the arm hooked around my elbow and the people passing by too busy going about their lives to notice. The drive to a dark clearing in a wood, the cold barrel to the forehead . . . I can't help feeling selfishly afraid. But as I make my way down Holywell past the old city walls, the clouds in the west begin to thin, and the wind picks and plays with rents of blue sky as the sun flickers through. Dawdling along the narrow, unpredictable streets that wind around the backs of the colleges giving glimpses of kitchen dustbins and Wren towers, the light brightens. And Oxford. Oxford! All the years that I longed to see myself like this amid these quads and buildings, the twin shining rivers, the whispering corridors of learning.

Working on my book each evening after school in the front parlor as my mother nodded over her knitting in her chair behind me, I always knew that the dream was impossibly far away. But nourishing my one great work, I never even bothered to think of setting some more realistic target and perhaps submitting an essay on local history to the *Lichfield Mercury* or *Staffordshire Life*. It was all or nothing—and perhaps in my heart of hearts I was happy enough with nothing. One evening, I remember, the work at the parlor table was going particularly well and the hours slid by until I cracked my weary fingers and turned around to my mother to comment on the faint but foul smell that I had noticed. She sat unusually still in the dimness of the room behind me. Her head was lolling, her fingers were clenched around the knitting needles and her ball of wool had rolled from her lap in her final spasm.

Three

Now that the rain has ended and the sun has come out, all of Britain seems to drift, held aloft on wafts of dandelion and vanilla, the dazzling boom of bandstand brass. Each morning, the *Express*, the *New Cross*, and the *Mail*

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vie for punning headlines and pictures of Modernist maidens in fountains, ice cream-smeared babies, fainting guardsmen. With or without me, life seems intent on going on—but I find that I remain remarkably active in any case: with Christlow's help, for example, I can manage to be fully dressed, my lungs coughed-out, my tablets taken, my limbs unstiffened, my eyes fully focused, my heartbeat and my breathing made almost regular by half past eight or nine at the latest. And thus aroused, thus fortified, I have taken a surprising number of trips out this August. This, after all, is my last chance to see anything, and I can easily afford to squander my savings by going First Class. But still, as I queue at the Oxford City Post Office for the appropriate cross-county passes that will get me to Lichfield, I can't help but wonder if the woman behind the spittle-frosted glass knew my acquaintance, and who emptied his desk upstairs in the Censor's Office, who scratched his name off the tea club . . .

Next morning, climbing aboard the *Sir Galahad* after it slides into Oxford Station, its streamlined snout oozing steam and the sense of far-away, I stumble past four senior officers of the KSG, the Knights of Saint George, as I make my way down the carriage in search of my reserved seat. They all look sleek, plump—seals basking on a sunny shore, washed by the warm waves of the future. A mother and daughter are opposite my place in the no smoking section further along. The morning sun pours over their blonde hair and their innocent blue eyes rest on me as I slump down. I feel I must look strange and sinister, already a harbinger of death, yet their manner is welcoming, and we begin to talk as the train pulls out in that absent, careless manner that strangers sometimes have. The husband, the little girl's father, is a Black Watch major who's risen through the Army ranks on merit in the way that only happens in real conflicts, and is currently on active service on the ever-troublesome India-Afghanistan border. The mother tells me she sleeps with his and John Arthur's photograph beneath her pillow. I smile as their faces shine back at me and then gaze out of the window, watching the telegraph lines rise and fall and the world flash by, carrying me on toward Lichfield.

Living in what I still thought of my mother's house back in the years before the War, alone and celibate, I still entertained thoughts of writing my book. But, after many botched attempts, I began to wonder if something else was missing. History, after all, is ever-changing, and must always be viewed from the perspective of the present. I was still as neutral in politics as I imagined myself to have become sexually, yet in my efforts to take myself seriously as a historian, I decided that politics probably lay at the cutting edge of current affairs, and I joined the local Fabian Society. It was probably a good job that I dipped my toe into the waters of political debate without any high ideals. Still, I can see with hindsight that it was an interesting time for British left wing politics. The younger and generally rowdier element (of which Francis Eveleigh was undoubtedly a member) were busily undermining the cozy nineteenth century libertarianism of William Morris—the Morris, that is, who existed before he was re-invented by Modernism. But it was all naïvely innocent. Francis, for example, worked six days a week behind the counter of the John Menzies bookstall at Lichfield station, lived in digs, lifted his little finger when he drank tea, was secretive about his background, and spoke with a suspiciously upper-class accent. Still, I was drawn to him. I liked his youth, his enthusiasm, his good looks.

He and I began meeting occasionally after he had finished work at the sta-

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tion bookstall, and we would take quiet walks across the flat Staffordshire countryside. When we were alone, there was a lot less of the usual posturing and political debate, but nevertheless, the prospect of a war in Europe soon began to dominate our conversation. Francis, although supposedly a pacifist, was fascinated by the whole idea of conflict. In a white shirt, his collar loose, he would walk ahead of me as we wandered at evening along misty canal towpaths and across muddy spring fields. His body was slight and bony, yet filled with energy. He grew his hair a little longer than was then fashionable, and I loved to watch, as he walked ahead of me, the soft nest of curls that tapered toward the back of his neck.

"You understand, Griff," he said to me once as we stood to catch our breath amid the cows beneath a dripping tree. "I can work these things out when we walk together."

My heart ached. I could only smile back at him.

The idea of our taking a cycling trip to Scotland seemed to evolve naturally, gradually from this process. That was probably a good thing, for if I had planned that Francis and I could be on our own, sharing thoughts, ideas, and boarding house rooms for a whole fortnight, I am sure that love and terror would have prevented it from ever happening. But somehow, I found that we were checking maps and timetables on the basis of a vague hypothesis—playing with the whole idea, really—until suddenly we were talking proper dates and actual bookings and the thing had miraculously come about. And I was to pay. That, too, slipped easily under the yawning bridge of my uncertainties. Thank God, the idea of two men traveling together on holiday raised few suspicions in the summer of 1914. Francis, bless him, probably had a far clearer idea of where he was leading me, and what was to come. But for all of that, for absolutely everything about him, I am eternally grateful.

We ate in the dining carriage as the train pulled out of Birmingham, studying our maps. Yet we went to our shared sleeping compartment quite early, I recall, filled with that soothed, tired feeling that only the start of a long railway journey brings. In that narrow compartment, I tried to busy myself with sorting the contents of my suitcase on the lower bunk as Francis undressed beside me. Trembling, alone after he had headed up the corridor to wash, looking down at the half-erection that, absurdly, was trying to nudge its way out of my pajamas, I cursed myself for my stupidity in ever falling for the idea of this holiday. I pushed past him when he returned, and pulled down a window in the corridor and watched the fields burn with sunset as the telegraph wires rose and fell, rose and fell. By the time I finally got back to the compartment, the landscape had become a grainy patchwork and Francis was up in the top bunk, reading *News from Nowhere*. Muttering about how tired I felt, I climbed in below.

I stared up at the shape his body made against the bars of the bunk. It truly was soothing, this motion of the carriage, the steel clatter of the wheels. Eventually, when Francis turned off his light and wished me goodnight, I truly felt ready for sleep and when, about half an hour later, he began to shift down from his bunk, I simply imagined that he was heading off on a final trip to the toilets. Instead, he climbed in beside me.

His pajama shirt was already undone. He smelled faintly of soap and toothpowder, and beneath that of the warmth of his own flesh, like burnt lemon.

"This is what you want, Griff, isn't it. . . ?" he said. Then he put his arms around me, and he kissed me, and nothing was ever the same.

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* * *

Clatter, tee, tee . . . Even here, on the way to Lichfield, that same sense of passing. Then as now, the onward rush of a train. Stations beside canal bridges. Stations in farmyards. Stations piled with empty milk churns and mailbags in the middle of pretty nowhere. And posters, posters. Posters of the seaside and posters of the country. Posters of towns. **The Lake District for Rest and Quiet Imaginings. Take the Sunday Special and Visit Lambourn Downs,** where a smiling couple are picnicking with their two pretty daughters as colored kites dance against a cloudless sky. . . .

Francis loved the place names as we journeyed across Scotland. Mellon Udrigle. Plockton. Grey Dog. Poolewe. Smearisary. The Summer Isles. When he wasn't reading the newspapers he got hold of every day to keep track of the repercussions of the assassination of an obscure Archduke, he'd run his finger along some impossibly contoured and winding route that the pedals of our basket-fronted Northampton Humbers were supposed to carry us down, chosen entirely to include as many of those wonderful names as possible.

Alone together in those yellow-lit boarding house rooms with their great empty wardrobes, riding the creaking seas of hollowed-out double beds, his chin cupped in his hand and bare feet in the air, laughing at something, humming to himself, twiddling his toes, Francis would study his maps and his newspapers. Then he'd lay a hand across me and pull me closer with a touch that was both warmly sexual and at the same time had nothing to do with sex at all. "This is real history, Griff," he said to me once when I expressed amazement that anyone should care about what was happening in the Balkans. "How can you pretend to be a historian and then let all this pass you by?"

I remember that Francis and I were in a pub on the evening of August 4th 1914, when Asquith announced that Britain would be at war with Germany from midnight. I knew that he was going to enlist, and I could see that he was elated. It was no use arguing. And I, too, was excited by the prospect of this new future that lay ahead of us—that night, it was impossible not to be. Suddenly, after years of trying, we British could love each other and hate the Germans. Politics and diplomacy seemed trivial compared to the raw certainties of war. Soon, we were dancing in the crowd. Francis even kissed me. That August night, nobody cared. We were all one mass of hope and humanity.

On our journey south from the Highlands, without access to a sleeping carriage now that everyone wanted to travel, I did my best to talk seriously to Francis. I needed to fix as much of him in my mind as I could. But he was teasing about his past. *Yes, I went to* school *but it was just a place. How do you think I learned? Do I have a* brother? *—well, you tell me. Go on, you know what I'm like, so guess* . . . It was a game we'd played before, but this time it was harsher, more hurtful. As we waited on swarming platforms and changed trains and searched for seats and stood in crowded corridors, I ended up telling Francis about myself instead.

"So, Griff . . . ," He smiled as we leaned against a window by our cases and the sleepers raced by. "You want to be a Professor? Have you ever even *been* to Oxford? Or would that spoil the dream?"

The train rocked us on, and Lichfield, despite my willing it not to, arrived soon enough. Francis and I parted outside the station without saying very much or even shaking hands, and I walked off toward what I still thought of as my mother's house almost looking forward to being alone. In Saint Martin's

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Square, a brass band was playing. Men, jolly as a works outing, talking and laughing freely in the way that we British so seldom do, queued up to enlist in the Staffordshire Regiment. They beckoned me to join them, but there was no bitterness when I smiled and shook my head, such was our country's optimism.

Walking once again along the strangely shrunken streets of my home town, heavier now with the burdens of age and illness, looking over the low front wall of the house where I lived most of my life, I note the pebbledash that the new owner has added to the rendering, the replacement window frames. Hindley's Cake Shop is still there with what look like the same cakes displayed in the window, although the butcher's shop above which Francis used to live has become a gent's outfitters, and the window of his room now bears the words **Formal Dress Hire**.

I take the bus in search of Burntwood Charity. But there's no sign of the school where I started my career—or even of the road that led to it with fields on the far side, or of the pit wheels. The whole place consists of nothing but houses and a vast new "comprehensive" school. Quite remarkably when you come to think about it, John Arthur remains uncommemorated. I visit the Town Library, another old haunt, but, just as in Oxford, the Lichfield census data and the voting lists and the ratings and the parish records and pretty much every kind of document covering the period between the 1900s and the start of the thirties have been destroyed. Here, in fact, the scythes have cut even deeper. Even the *records* of the records had gone, along with the spaces they were supposed to occupy. It's as if whole decades have vanished entirely.

The War in Britain was a strange affair, like a fever. People were more sociable, strangers would talk to each other, and even I went out more often; to the theater or to the music hall, or to one of the new cinematographs. At school, I taught my lads about the many historic acts of German aggression, and had them compose outraged letters to the Kaiser about the Zeppelin bombings of Great Yarmouth.

Francis wrote me the occasional letter at first after he volunteered. *Griff, you'd hardly know me now. . . .* I could almost see him trying on his new soldierly identity. The letters were filled at first with catalogues of acquaintances and military stupidities as he was posted around various training camps and temporary barracks in southern England. They grew shorter and blander once he reached France and the rapidly solidifying Western Front. I was like the millions of puzzled relatives and loved ones who were the recipients of such letters. I put his terseness down to shortage of time, and then to the military censors. But soon, by early 1915, Francis stopped writing to me altogether.

Two years passed. I only learned about Francis by chance when, queuing for a copy of the *Post* from the John Menzies bookstall on the platform at Lichfield station, I suddenly thought I heard his name being spoken. I knew what had happened straight away, just from the voices, although none of them had known him well. I'd heard its echo many times before from teachers and children at school, and people you passed in the street talking about a son, a husband, a brother. Like so many others, Francis Eveleigh had died in the Somme Offensive.

Pushed numbly into action, prodding and probing at the facts of Francis's life in a way that I had resisted when he was still alive, I was able to discover that his parents lived in a large house set in arable countryside on the out-

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skirts of Louth in Lincolnshire. Standing outside in my muddy shoes on a cold day as quizzical light fanned from their hall, I introduced myself to the maid as "a friend from Lichfield," and was ushered into the drawing room where Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh stood still as china figures on either side of the unlit fire, as if they had been waiting there for a long time. Mr. Eveleigh managed a bank, while his wife (Francis's eyes and pale skin, his full dark hair that she always tied back in a bun) oscillated between various bridge clubs and civic societies. They were solid, dependable, and I was flattered and charmed that they were prepared to have anything to do with me. There was no hint, of course, that Francis and I had been lovers—or even that he'd had any kind of sexual life. But there was always a sense, somewhere amid all the weekends I was invited to the Eveleighs' house, of a shared deeper fondness.

The light was always grey at the Eveleighs' house, and a chill came to whatever part of your body was turned from the fire. Sitting in the dining room as the clocks ticked and the fire spat through interminable meals of boiled cabbage, boiled potatoes, and boiled bacon, it wasn't hard to see why Francis had gone away. But I found it easy enough to fit in, and there was always the pleasure of being able to sleep in Francis's childhood bed which still bore the imprint of his body, to slide open drawers that contained the starched uniforms of the various cheap public schools he had been forced to attend and bury my face in their folds.

Mr. Eveleigh talked endlessly about politics and the War. He'd ask me about the Jews; whether I didn't think they were involved in a conspiracy to set one half of Europe against the other. I think he even mentioned "dumping the buggers on some remote Scottish island and leaving them to get on with it." He asked if I agreed that the average working man was fundamentally lazy. He doubted whether every Tom, Dick, and Harry should be given the vote, and thought Lloyd George was just a Welsh windbag—what this country really needed was a true, strong leader. . . .

The last time I saw the Eveleighs was just after the French Capitulation. I remember that my train journey up through Peterborough and Lincoln took place in an atmosphere as feverish as it had been when Francis and I journeyed back from Scotland four years before—but also very different. Strangers were talking to strangers again, but their voices were confused, their faces were hard and angry. There were rumors already of Lloyd George's resignation and of a General Election, although, as all the major parties had supported the War, no one had any clear idea of what the campaign would be about. I bought one of the few papers that were left at a newsagent's and stared at the headline. **War Over. Allies Defeated.** It was 6 August 1918; a date, it seemed to me, that would never look right in the cold pages of history.

The Eveleighs' front door was open—which seemed like final confirmation that everything had changed. People were milling. Clients from the Bank. Friends from the bridge circle. Farmers and neighbors. Time passed. Voices grew louder, then began to fade. I was tired and had a headache by the time I found myself alone with Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh. Still, Mr. Eveleigh insisted on spreading out a map of Belgium and France, then asking me to explain exactly who was to blame for this mess. No doubt making less sense than I imagined, I told him that the economies of all the nations had been seriously weakened, that the Bolsheviks' treaty with Germany had been a capitulation, and the promised American reinforcements had been too few, and had

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come too late. Once the Germans made a break in the Allied lines, the certainties of trench warfare had crumbled; tactics were suddenly about communications, swiftness, surprise. With Paris succumbing and the British and Colonial Forces clustered chaotically around Cherbourg and Dieppe, there was nothing left to do but surrender to the Germans.

"We can't leave it like this," Mr. Eveleigh said, swaying as he poured himself yet another whisky. "There'll have to be another war. . . ."

Later, Mrs. Eveleigh showed me up to my room. "You might as well have these," she said, handing me a child's exercise book with Francis's name on the cover, a couple of battered tin toys. "Oh, and there's something else." I sat on the bed and waited as she carried in a cardboard box with a War Office stamp on it. She lifted it open, filling the room with some faint other smell. Mud? Death? It was certainly unpleasant. The box proved to be half empty. There was that cheap edition of *News from Nowhere*. A spare pair of thick standard issue grey-green military socks. More odd was the pistol. It seemed well-kept and, more surprising still, a screw of yellowed paper containing a dozen of what looked like live bullets. Mrs. Eveleigh just gazed down at me as I sat on the bed and handled the thing.

"Keep that too," she said, something new and harsh in her voice. "I don't want it."

She was standing closer now. Like me, and in her own quiet way, I think she had passed into that grey hinterland that lies beyond an excess of drink. I glanced around at the familiar wallpaper, the twee pictures, expecting her to turn and leave. But she just stood there in front of me, her hands knotting and unknotting across the long line of buttons that ran down her black dress.

"I only feel as though I've lost him now," she said: "Before I knew we'd thrown away the War, it was always as if some part of him might still come back to me."

I nodded, staring up at this twisted image of Francis as a middle-aged woman. Her eyes were lost in shadow; a shade deeper than black.

"And I wonder, even now, if he ever knew a woman." She took a step closer so that our knees touched. I was looking right up at her now, the folds of her chin, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. "I never knew what he was like," she said.

"He was . . ." I tensed my hands, feeling enclosed, threatened. But something snapped. "I loved him, Mrs. Eveleigh. I just loved him . . ."

She took a step back and nodded severely. I had truly thought for a moment that we could somehow share our Francislessness. But, instead, I heard the sigh of her dress as she left the room, the soft clunk of the door closing.

The Eveleighs never wrote to me after that.

I never saw them again.

With half an hour to kill and the return train to Oxford delayed, I buy a *Lichfield Mercury* from the same John Menzies bookstall at the station and then share the waiting room with three members of the Young Empire Alliance. They're little more than lads, really, and yet they affect maturity and ease as they smoke their Pall Malls and stretch out in long-trousered "boy-scout" uniforms. Two of them begin to hum a tune under their breath, alternately kicking each side of my bench in rhythm. A woman in a floral hat appears at the window, and I shoot her a despairing glance before she decides not to come in. I do my best to study the paper, the **Sits Vac,** where a Decent Widow is looking for a Clean Anglo Saxon Couple to take care of her and her

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Nice House. The Classified columns, where various Modernist and EA self-education courses and camps are on offer, along with supposedly War Office-endorsed photographs of the Mons Archers. The photo on the back page, beside a column giving advice to Young Mr. and Mrs. Modern on setting up home, is of an elderly woman hunched in the stocks on a village green. She has been put there, the caption jokily informs us, as a "show of local outrage." Similar submissions from other readers are invited.

"I was wondering . . ." The best-looking of the YEA youths smiles. "Where's an old bastard like you going?"

"Oxford," I croak.

"Not one of them fucking eggheads, are you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact . . ."

"Tell you what . . ." He stands up. His face is tanned. His brown hair is cut so short that it would feel like velvet if you stroked it. He comes close to me and leans down. "The problem is . . ." A soft rain of his spittle touches my cheek. "I'm all out of cunting matches. Light my fag for me?"

He keeps his eyes on mine as I fumble in my coat pocket. His friends watch on, grinning. His irises are an intense, cloudless, blue. He squints slightly as the match flares, and he holds my hand to guide it toward the tip of his cigarette. Moments later, my train arrives, and I leave the waiting room a sweaty wreck, still bearing an uncomfortable erection.

My journey, though, is far from over. Summer heat has buckled the main line rails, and I end up stranded on the sun-bleached platform of a remote rural station with the faint promise of an eventual Oxford connection. There, I talk to the station master, a round-faced man whose body bulges gently from the gaps between the buttons of his uniform like rising dough.

"You know," I say, clearing my throat, taking the kind of risk that the nearness of death encourages, "I've always wondered what happened to the people who were sent north. The newspapers about five years back always used to speak of the Jews. I mean—" I hesitate, searching without success for a better word, "their relocation."

His eyes narrow as he looks at me, but the station is empty, and the rails stretch down through Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire amid nodding scoops of cow parsley and wild fennel. The air seems joined to the sky. We are safe here, alone. At other times, in other, happier, places, I suspect that this station master and I might be engaged in some other kind of transaction. That is why we choose to trust each other.

"It's quieter here now," he says. "But three, four years ago, a lot of freight trains went past. Long things, they were, with slatted wooden sides, like the farmers use for market—only always at night. One of them pulled up, and this soldier got me out of bed to send a message down the line. A bad smell came off the trucks and I could hear movement inside. I thought it was just animals. But there were voices. And you could see their eyes. . . . Children's fingers poking out of the slats . . ."

The station master stands up and shuffles through the tin heat toward his little station house. He returns with something in his hands.

"I found this," he says, unfolding it, holding it out to me. "On the platform afterward."

It's a travel poster, almost like the ones for Skegness and Barmouth that are smiling down at us. A family are striding down a winding road that leads to a glittering sea. The father is grinning, beckoning us to join him while his wife holds the hands of their two daughters, who are chattering and skipping

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excitedly, their pig-tails dancing in mid-air. Set within the ocean, more hinted at than revealed, yet clearly the focus of the picture, lie a scatter of small islands. Looked at closely, they blur to just a few clever brush strokes, but they suggest hills and meadows, wooded glades, white beaches, and pretty shingle-roofed and whitewashed houses; a warm and happy place to live. The caption reads: **Relocate to the Summer Isles.**

The promised train does eventually arrive, and the stationmaster and I make our farewells, briefly touching hands, a soft pressure of the flesh that I will soon be losing. I gaze out of the carriage as the train rattles on, close to tears. Oxfordshire comes. Then Oxford. Along Park End and George Street, the city is warm, summer-quiet, at peace with itself now it has lost the unwanted distraction of students, and smells sweetly of dusty bookshops, old stone, dog shit, grass clippings.

"Something for you, sir." Christlow says, nearly falling over himself to intercept me as I limp across the quad. I take the letter he's waving and climb the old oak stairs to my rooms, then stare at the crested envelope as I lean against the door, wondering if I should play a game with myself for a while and let it rest, wondering just how dangerous a letter can be . . . but already my hands are tearing at the wax seal, dragging out the one thick sheet of paper that lies inside.

Beneath a lion and unicorn, it reads:

WHITEHALL
FROM THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
8 August, 1940

G B—
I know it's been a *long* time, but I honestly haven't forgotten.

You may have heard that there's going to be a "National Celebration" in London before and around 21st October, Trafalgar Day. It probably still seems a long way off, but I'd really like to see you there. I promise it'll be nothing formal.

I really do hope you can make it. My staff will send you the details.

All the very best as ever,
J A.

Later that evening, I build a small fire in the grate of my rooms and feed it with the pages of my book. Everything, after all, ends this way. Napoleon, Peter the Great, Bismarck . . . all the *Figures of History*. The pages curl. Glowing fragments of paper dance up the chimney. Soon, there's barely anything left to burn. It's all over so quickly, and what is left of my life, as I open up my old suitcase and cradle Francis's old pistol in my hands, feels simpler already.

Four

My college principal Cumbernald comes to my rooms one evening, stretching out in one of the chairs facing the fireplace and companionably beckoning me to join him. He's a tall man, is Cumbernald. He radiates smooth affluence

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and, like most inferior academics, has pushed his way into administration. Yet he has risen ridiculously far, ridiculously fast. It's almost nice, as the sunlight gleams on his bald head, to think that I'm probably going to bugger up his plans for the next academic year by dying.

"About Michaelmas Term," he begins, crossing his legs to reveal a surprisingly brown length of shin. "I was thinking of giving you the old decline and fall for a change. Bit of a problem with Roberts, you see. Evidently wrote a book back in the twenties about the economics of the Roman Empire. Argued that the colonies were a drain on Rome. *Then* he keeps drawing comparisons with Britain. Even crops up in his students essays—although of course we can't expect the dear things to know any better unless we teach them, can we?"

"I'd be surprised if Roberts' book was still available."

"But that's not the point, is it? Remember *Hobson* . . . ? And *Brooking?* Gone, of course. History changes . . ."

"By the way," I say, interrupting him as he pushes on, "you'll have to do without me for the first week or so of Michaelmas."

"Oh?"

"I have a personal invitation to the Trafalgar Day celebrations from John Arthur."

I reach for the gold embossed wad of papers that arrived soon after that letter. Cumbernald studies them. He swallows audibly. "I'm sure that we can manage without you for a week or so. . . ." He smiles at me. "But you're looking a bit peaky, Brook, if you don't mind me saying so. And Eileen and the children and I, well, we have a chalet at this place outside Ross on Wye. It's very clean, very friendly, very smart. All very *modern*. We're always saying there's room enough to fit in at least one *interesting* guest. So I was wondering . . ."

Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips . . .

Cumbernald's two daughters are making piston-movements with their elbows, going faster and faster, pretending the Daimler's a train as we bowl along the A40 toward Wales and Gloucester. Christine's the eldest at eleven; a plump pre-adolescent who's designated "clever" and "reads a lot." Barbara's seven, thinner, more self-assured, and "sporty." Cumbernald clicks on the radio, and he and his wife Eileen argue about whether they want to listen to the Light or the Third Program. Snatches of Vera Lynn, static, and Tchaikovsky roar out from the loudspeakers—it's like the avant-garde "European" music they'd be so quick to condemn—while Christine and Barbara grow alarmingly green and listless.

It seems later than it really is when we finally arrive at Penrhos Park. The lodge, clad with logs like some fairy tale woodsman's cottage, is set in a pine-shaded clearing. Cumbernald prepares the dinner out-of-doors using a crude iron device filled with charcoal while Eileen unpacks and the children disappear into the pines. Looking over the forest crown, I see the smoke of other cooking fires rising like Indian signals. As it gets darker, Eileen sets a lantern on the outdoor table, and we watch the moths flutter into oblivion on the hot glass.

"You look a better man already," Cumbernald says, wineglass in his lap, looking pleasingly ridiculous in sandals, baggy shorts. "This is *some* place, though, isn't it, eh? A real breath of England."

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It's suddenly night-quiet. With the faint stirring of the pines, the distant hoot of an owl, it wouldn't take much imagination to catch the growl of a bear, the rooting chuff of a wild boar, the howl of wolves—the return of all the beasts of old to the vast Wood of Albion. Then I hear a thin shriek. The sound is so strange here, yet so familiar, that it takes me a moment to realize that it's simply the passing of a train.

"It's just a goods line," Cumbernald explains. "Never quite worked out where it's from or to. But I shouldn't worry, old chap. That's the latest I've ever heard one go by. They won't disturb your sleep. I was thinking we could go down to the Sun Area this morning, by the way. That okay with you?"

"Oh? Yes. Fine . . ."

There's eggs and bacon in the morning, which the girls have already been down to buy from the site shop so that Eileen, back in her traditional role now the cooking's indoors, can prepare them. The sound of their sizzling mingles in my head with the clack and roar of the trains that fractured my night.

The Sun Area is lavishly signposted, yet still requires a long trek past high hedges and long walls, then a queue at a turnstile. The swing doors beyond lead to a hot wooden tunnel lined with benches: some kind of changing area. Eileen Cumbernald removes her halter top and hangs it on a numbered peg. She isn't wearing a bra. Cumbernald, contrarily, first removes his shorts and his baggy y-fronts before taking off his sandals. The children, by some instantaneous process, are already naked, and scamper off to be swallowed by the bright square of light at the far end.

Cumbernald really *is* brown. Eileen, too; although I can see that she's not as blonde as she pretends to be. I undo a few token buttons of my shirt, wondering how easy it would be to wake up if I pinched myself. *The most amazing dream. I was with the college principal and his wife. They took all their clothes off, then asked me to do the same. . . .* Having somehow divested myself of my clothes, and hobbled into the amazing sunlight, I promise to keep an eye on the children, and sit beside the lake with a copy of something called *Future Past* while Cumbernald and Eileen go off to rustle up a team for the volleyball. Out in the distance, white sails are turning. A woman breastfeeds her child on the towel next to mine, engaging me in alarming snatches of conversation. A young Adonis strides at the water's edge. There's barely any hair on his body. Amid all this display, his genitals are disappointing—a small afterthought—but then it really is true what they say; people in the nude are impossibly decent. We should all go around like this. I can see it now—*Naturism—The Answer to the World's Troubles.* The only trouble is, I have a feeling that it was a title I drew the line at when I was stocking up for my researches on John Arthur in Blackwell's.

I squint at the book I'm supposed to be reading. *Chapter Five. The Greatness of the British Heritage—Truth or Myth?* But I can feel the air passing over me—it's strangely exhilarating—and I lie back on the towel and let the dreary pages splay in the sand. I'm part of the water, the air, the shouts and the cries. . . . Noon comes and goes. The afternoon glides by. I swim. I eat ice cream and a Melton Mowbray pork pie. I drink gallons of Vimto. By evening, as we grab our few belongings and head back up the slope, my skin is itchy and my prick, I can't help noticing, looks a bit like one of Cumbernald's barbecued sausages; cooked on just the one side.

That night, I shiver and roast, glazed in minty unguents. And the trains are busy again, banging back and forth, clanking chains and couplings, hiss-

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ing brakes as they trundle back and forth. Then a creak of springs comes through the lodge's thin walls as the Cumbernalds' indulge in their own bit of coupling. And there are children's cries, too; the clatter of the showers from which they emerge like drowned figures with their hair lank, thinly naked as they walk on to be swallowed by the light. . . .

At three o'clock, feeling stiff and nauseous, I pad through the dim parlor and open the patio doors. Silvery night lies over the trees in the clearing and I can hear the breath, like a great animal sighing, of a train that must be waiting almost directly behind the lodge. Barefoot, wrapped in my crumpled sheet, I wander toward it.

The huge engine sighs in impatience, then the wheels slip as they begin to take up the tension and move again, hauling the vast burden of wagons that lie behind. They are open-backed, covered in mottled camouflage, although it's easy enough to make out the huge bodies of the Lancaster bombers as they clack past. *Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips.*

I shuffle back to the lodge trailing my shroud, and lie down to stare up at the grey swirling ceiling of my bedroom, wondering if I could truly perform the act that my thoughts, like the grinding of some unstoppable engine, keep returning: the one deed that would make my life mean something, and repay the debt that I owe to my acquaintance, and to Larry Black, and to all the others, the pleading fingers pushed through the slats of a railway carriage, those lost smiling families heading down the road to be swallowed in the brightness of the Summer Isles. I even owe that same debt to Francis, although the reasons are much harder to explain.

Bang bang. Scurrying KSG officers. The salty drift of cordite and smoke. I'm Charlotte Corday as she plunges her knife into Marat, I'm Gavrilo Princip and the Archduke Ferdinand, I'm John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln . . . I'm *The Fingers of History.*

Bang bang. Long after the stillness of the forest has reasserted itself, I can still hear the sound of that train.

The commonly accepted truths about John Arthur's upbringing are that he was born John Arthur of William and Mary Arthur on 21 October 1890 in a suitably pretty cottage (now open to the public) in Cornwall. Mary Arthur died in childbirth, while William Arthur and his son ended up traveling up through Britain. In the popular imagination, John Arthur never lived in a house before the age of about twelve. He slept in barns, beneath hay ricks, under the stars. He sat on milestones gazing into the future. In the more far-fetched books I've encountered on my researches, you find pictures of John Arthur hand-prints in stones, John Arthur hawthorns that lean against the prevailing wind.

A small link with Burntwood is generally made along the lines of: "William Arthur set about learning his new trade as a miner in a pit (now-disused) in Southern Staffordshire, where John also briefly attended school before heading north to the South Yorkshire village of Raughton." The famous pit at Raughton has also closed—the miners' sons and daughters now work behind the counters of gift shops, museums, pubs, and guest houses. But here, for all I know, is where a boy called John Arthur really did spend his adolescence, and where his father died in a pit accident.

At the age of fifteen, John Arthur supposedly went down the pit himself. At eighteen, he was working the roads. At twenty, he went to night school in

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Nottingham. At twenty-three, the War intervened. He was wounded first in Flanders in 1915, and then again at the Somme. Back at the Front by mid 1917, promoted corporal, he famously won the George Cross at Ypres, yet somehow survived that and the confusion of defeat.

By the agreed figures, John Arthur would have been twenty-seven by then. As an ex-corporal, a leader of small groups of men used to the harsh decisions and horrors of war, he would have been well equipped to make his mark in the strange and violent world of 1920's fringe politics. In Italy, Il Duce was already in power, building Romanesque temples and thumping his chest from balconies, while John Arthur was still trying to make his voice heard in the corners of East End bars and complaining about the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles. But for Britain, as South Africa plunged into civil war and the Russians expanded across Afghanistan toward the Indian border, there were only other losses to face, and then one final crushing humiliation. In 1923, the Irish Republicans defeated the British forces street by street in Dublin, then savaged them as they withdrew north.

Nothing seemed to have much value then. I, too, queued outside the grocers for ten pounds, then fifty pounds, and then a hundred pounds worth of rotten cabbage as General Election followed General Election and MacDonald succeeded Baldwin and then Baldwin took over again. India was in famine. There were street-battles and demonstrations. When Churchill took power during the Third General Strike of 1924-5 and succeeded in defeating the miners and the train drivers, then issued a "Guaranteed Pound" that people somehow actually believed in, it seemed as though the worst of Britain's post-War nightmare might soon be over. But money was still short. The Communists and the Fascists didn't go away. Neither did the reparations payments, the feeling of defeat, the whole sense of national crisis that Churchill was often so good at exploiting. In this new world order, Britain was a third-rate nation; a little island off a big continent, just like Tierra del Fuego, Ceylon, Madagascar.

I saw John Arthur once at that time, although I know that's a privilege so many people claim nowadays. I was working by then as a teacher at Lichfield Grammar, although we had to subsist on credits and half pay. I was aware of the various bus stops and bushes that the lonely men of Lichfield would sometimes frequent, but I also knew about police entrapment, the shaming articles in the *Lichfield Mercury* that were so often followed by the suicide of those named, the long prison terms, and the beating and truncheon-buggerings that generally accompanied a night in the cells. Of course, I could have tried to honor Francis's memory by seeking someone I cared about, but instead, as the twenties progressed from the time of the five-hundred-pound haddock into Churchill's empty pontificating, I became a regular weekend visitor to London. From Francis, I had taken the turn that many inverts take once love has failed them, which is to remove the holy power from sex by making it a means of humiliation, parody, comedy, degradation.

Once, wandering near midnight in a area of East End dockland houses that the police had long given up policing, I crossed toward the gaslit clamor of an end-of-terrace pub. Just half an hour before, I had been on all fours on a fire-blackened wasteground, half-choking as a fist twisted the back of my collar while an unlubricated cock was forced into me. The pub was called the Cottage Spring. Dry-throated, I made my way toward the bar, then had to give up as I was pushed and shouldered. There was a sense, I suddenly realized, that something was about to happen here.

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Those were restless, anxious nights in the East End. Yet, so obsessed was I with my own sexual pursuits that I hadn't realized the many other kinds of risk I was taking. No one had noticed me when I came in, but I was sure that they would notice me now if I tried to leave. I glanced at the man nearest me and saw that his lips were moving. A whispered name, barely audible at first, but becoming clearer, was filling the air. He clambered up on the bar, then, did this man they were all calling for. His face looked pale and his hands were stained with mud or blood, yet he managed to keep an easy dignity as he balanced there with the dusty rows of glasses behind him. He raised his arms and smiled as he looked down at his people. Although he had changed much in the fifteen years since I had last seen him, it was that smile that finally made me certain. I was sure that this man—this John Arthur they were calling for—was in fact Francis Eveleigh.

I didn't wave my arms and cry out. I didn't even try to meet his eyes. Instead, I backed slowly toward a large pillar at the far end of the bar as others pushed forward to get nearer him. I hid myself from his gaze.

He's refined his technique in all the years since, has John Arthur. Nevertheless, his performance on that night was essentially the same as those since outside 10 Downing Street, and on the nation's television screens. That initial pause. The sharing, self-mocking smile that tells us that he still doesn't understand why it has to be *him*. By then, you're expecting nothing more than a calming chat, but suddenly, one of his anecdotes will twist around to some moment of national humiliation. Perhaps the forced scuttling of the fleet at Scarpa Flow in 1919, the refusal of MacDonald's petition to join the League of Nations, or Ireland. There was always Ireland. John Arthur, more clearly in control now, will gaze sadly at his audience. Truly, his eyes say, if only we could only laugh and play like innocent children . . .

When his voice rises, it is imperceptible because it always lies in the wake of the passion of his audience. He seems so calm, in fact, so reluctant, that you find yourself filled with a kind of longing. Exactly what was said on that night matters as little as his recent speeches at the Olympics, or to Fordingham's gloriously ill-fated Everest Expedition. All I know is that, despite my shock and fear, I was moved in the way that good popular music sometimes moves me. And that, when John Arthur had finished speaking and had stepped down from the bar, the men were happy to drift into the darkness toward whatever passed for their homes. For many years, I have clung to that image of John Arthur as the queller rather than the creator of violence. It's part of what has kept me sane.

I found myself momentarily rooted behind my pillar when the crowd began to thin in the Cottage Spring. Francis's hand was resting on the shoulder of a plumper, slightly older man who is now our Deputy Prime Minister, George Arkwright, and he was also talking to his then second-in-command Peter Harrison, who was executed for treason in 1938. I was surprised, as he stood there, to realize how much I still longed to hold him. Then, with that unnamed sense of being watched, he cast his eyes across the fallen tables and chairs in my direction. I just stood there with my hands in the pockets of my grubby coat, looking like the aging mess I knew I was. For a moment, John Arthur's eyes bore the trace of a smile as they met mine, a shade of what could only be recognition. Then he looked away.

Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon . . .

Back from Penrhos Park to Oxford, and the days flash by. Golden Week

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nears. The stones and the fields glow with anticipation. The older University hands, us fellows and dons, doctors and vicars, MA's in abstruse subjects, best-selling authors, sexual molesters, surreptitious alcoholics, athletes, and aesthetes, caw and flap at each other in our black gowns as the punts still move and slow, move and slow beneath Magdalene Bridge.

Resuming my occasional traipses over to the Radcliffe, new X-rays reveal that the vast cancerous network that runs through my body has stopped growing. It's still there, still almost certainly lethal, but, to all intents and purposes, the thing's biding its time. Waiting, just as I am, while the days slip by into the maw of history.

"Couldn't help noticing, sir," Christlow says, preparatory to spitting on his cloth and wiping the small mirror above my bookshelves one morning, "that you've had an Invitation." He actually says, *Han Hinvitation,* on the traditional working class assumption that anything posh has an extra "h" in it.

"That's right," I turn from the A-Z Map of Central London I've been studying.

"Matter of fact," Christlow continues, still rubbing the mirror, "I'll be off down in London myself for the period of the celebrations. In my own minor small capacity. So we may bump into each other . . ."

"I'll certainly keep an eye out," I say. But London's a big place.

He puts down his rag, and we find ourselves gazing at each other. I'd never realized before how much Christlow looks like Mussolini: Modernism was probably always his destiny. He clears his throat. He's probably about to ask me why I'm always hanging around now when he's cleaning my rooms, and why I've put another lock on that old suitcase. But he simply gathers up his things as if in some sudden hurry and closes the door, leaving me to my thoughts, my dreams, my desk, my studies.

I open the window to take in a great, shivering breath of Oxford air. It has a cooler feel to it this morning. The limes are dripping, sycamore seeds are spinning, soft autumn bathes the towers and rooftops and domes with light. And the bells are ringing, filling my head, my eyes, my lungs, my heart. Oh, Oxford! Oxford! I cannot bear to leave you.

But history beckons.

My moment has come.

Five

The narrator in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* awakes in London to find that summer has at last arrived. The air smells sweeter. The Thames runs cleaner, and the buildings along its banks have been transformed into glorious works of art. The people wear bright costumes, and smile at each other as they go about their everyday tasks. There is no poverty. Children camp in the Kensington Woods. The Houses of Parliament have been turned into a vegetable market.

A full century and a half before Morris predicted, his dream of Nowhere has come true. Truly, I think as I sip gin and gaze down from an airship droning high above the stately parks and teeming streets and the sun-flecked river, this city has never looked lovelier. The Adelphi Theater. Cleopatra's Needle. The sightseeing boats that thread their wakes across the Thames . . . the engines of the *Queen of Air and Darkness* rise in pitch as she sinks down through the skies and across the flashing lakes and lidos of Hyde

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Park. Eventually, after much tilting and squealing of airbags, she is safely moored to a huge gantry, and I and a dozen or so other minor dignitaries are escorted along a wobbling tunnel to the lift that bears us dizzily to the ground.

It would be rude not to smile and wave for the lenses of the Pathé News camera that follow the progression of our open top bus. Who knows, a darker thought nudges me, this image of the killer's face may be the one that makes it into history. We turn along Oxford Street into the wide new architecture of Charing Cross Road. Then Trafalgar Square, from where the Victory Spire at the end of Park Lane looks like some Jules Verne rocket, or a new secret weapon. Compared with all of this, the great government offices along Whitehall are solid and somber. To our right lies Downing Street, and, even as I watch, the gates slide open on electronic hinges, and out rolls a black Rover 3 Liter with Austin police patrol cars ahead and behind. There are no bells, no flashing lights. As the cars turn up Whitehall, I glimpse John Arthur's face, absorbed in thought as he stares from the Rover's plain unsmoked glass, and my heart freezes.

A loud-hailer calls out incoherent instructions as we disembark outside the New Dorchester's entrance on the South Bank. Reeve-Ellis, the Under Secretary who's in charge of us, lays a hand on my shoulder and steers me through the doors and across the vast main atrium where bare-breasted caryatids raise their arms to support the arches of the glass-domed roof.

"Two days before the big day now, Brook," he murmurs in that dry voice of his. "About time we had a little chat . . ."

He leads me to a door marked **No Admittance**, where plump Police Constable T3308 jumps up from his chair, his holstered pistol swinging between his legs like a cock. My skin prickles, but all that lies beyond is a long corridor bustling with the click of typewriters and the slam of filing cabinets. "'Fraid everything's a mess here," Reeve-Ellis says as he removes his jacket in his temporary office and shrugs on a baggy grey cardigan. His little mustache bristles as he attempts a smile. I know already that Reeve-Ellis is a Balliol man, 1909 intake, and was working in the Cabinet Office when Lloyd George resigned. So he's seen it all, has toiled under every shade of administration.

"I've been meaning to ask," I begin. "Exactly how—"

"—You'll be up in the VIP seats for the afternoon parade up the Mall. Have to miss the end of *that*, though, I'm afraid, if we're going to get you across to Downing Street in time."

"So there'll be—what?—about twenty or so people in the gardens at Number Ten. And I suppose some . . . staff?"

"That's about right. It's an informal occasion."

"What if it rains?"

"We're a lucky country, Brook. It won't rain." He smiles again. "As I say, keep a space in your diary for six o'clock, Monday. Don't worry about protocol or what suit to wear—JA's the least bothered person about that kind of thing you could possibly imagine."

"I do have a new suit, actually," I say. "It was delivered to me this morning from Hawkes on Saville Row." Hand-tailored, the thing cost me a fortune, and feels quite different to any clothing I've ever worn. Just as I requested, the jacket has been tailored with an especially strong and deep inner left-side pocket to accommodate the pistol that currently lies hidden in the aged lining of the old suitcase I have brought with me.

* * *

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I thought I'd already been through all the possible stages of grieving for my Francis when I discovered that he was alive again. I'd been angry. Almost suicidally miserable. Eventually, I'd come to imagine that my life was no longer under his shadow. But just knowing how I looked to him as I stood in that pub made me realize that everything about my life was still Francis, Francis, Francis. What, otherwise, was I doing in London in the first place, if not trying to wipe out my love for him?

Even in 1925, this John Arthur that he'd become was no longer a totally obscure figure, and I was soon saved the trouble of having to delve through *National Rights!* and *The Spitalfields Chronicle* to follow his activities. His was one of several names to emerge into the wider acres of political debate on the back of Churchill's use of right wing groups to help break the long succession of strikes. But John Arthur was always ahead of the rest. With his accent, his manners, he seemed both educated *and* working class. In an age of lost certainties, he made good copy. And he had a knack of simply stating the obvious—that Britain was poor, that we were shamed by the loss of Ireland and Empire—that most politicians seem to lack. Unlike William Arkwright, Peter Harrison, and the soon-to-be rising star of Jim Toller, John Arthur was never openly racist or intolerant. His carefully cultured background, the wanderings, the War record, the thuggery and unemployment of the East End, presented, like the rest of the man, so many facets that you could select the one you preferred and ignore the rest.

In the winter of 1927, John Arthur stood at a by-election in Nottinghamshire as the first-ever Empire Alliance candidate. I can well remember the moment when I picked up my newspapers from the doormat on the morning after his maiden speech in Parliament. Appropriately enough, I think it was the *Sketch* that ran a smaller by-line asking **Who Is Geoffrey Brook?** which quoted an aside in his speech about how he'd been much influenced by a teacher named Geoffrey Brook in Burntwood, Lichfield. After all, I was a distant memory to him; there was no reason why he should exactly remember my name.

Over the next few days, when the press discovered my address, I had my own small moment of fame. They called me Geoffrey, and it seemed churlish to correct them when they were so nearly right. Would it have made any difference if I had announced that, while I knew little enough about this man who called himself John Arthur, he reminded me markedly of someone else with whom I had once had a homosexual affaire? Other than betraying a trust and guaranteeing my death in some freak accident, I doubt it.

The next year, 1928, while John Arthur was joined by another 10 EA MP's at the spring General Election, and Churchill continued about the dogged business of keeping himself in power, the editor of the *Daily Sketch* approached me about writing a weekly column. At last, I felt like someone who mattered. Churchill, meanwhile, lasted until October 1929 and the Wall Street Crash. Ramsey MacDonald then became Prime Minister of a Government of National Unity while Oswald Mosley struggled to reunite Labour before giving up and joining the EA six months later, thus forcing yet another General Election. This time, John Arthur traveled from constituency to constituency by Vickers aeroplane, and such was the dangerous glamour of the EA by then that even his fat deputy George Arkwright with his trademark Homburg hat became a vote winner. Uniformed EA members marched in the streets of all the big towns, noting names as people emerged from polling stations. The EA won seventy seats. Amid an atmosphere of increasing crisis—unemployment, means tests, riots and starvation, open revolt in India, popu-

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lar support for Unionist terrorist attacks in Ireland—John Arthur refused new Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's offer of a post in his Cabinet.

Chamberlain's "get tough" policy in India over the next few months only served to increase the bloodshed, and the rest of the Empire was also starting to fray. A new Egyptian Government nationalized the Suez Canal. Welsh and Scottish Nationalists began to talk of independence. The country was in a state of collapse. Chamberlain was probably right in imagining that Britain would be torn apart by another pointless General Election. He was running out of options, but there remained one figure that the great mass of the public seemed to believe in. Not really a *politician* at all, and head of an organization that had never properly disowned violence. But controllable, surely; a useful figurehead to keep the prols happy and the bully boys at bay while the real brains got on with sorting out the mess that the country was in. It was thus without fuss or bloodshed, in a deal in which he seemingly played no part, that John Arthur was finally summoned to Number 10 and offered the only Cabinet post that he had said he would ever consider accepting.

Just after six o'clock on the chilly evening of November 10, 1932, John Arthur emerged from that famous black door to the clink of flashbulbs. In those days, traffic was still allowed along Downing Street, and he had to check left and right before he crossed over and raised his arms, smiling slightly as he looked about him. He said that he would be heading off to Buckingham Palace in a few minutes, where he planned to seek King George's advice about forming Greater Britain's first Modernist Government.

The flags and the bunting are going up as I'm chauffeur-driven across London to meet the King and Queen next morning. Tomorrow is the eve of Trafalgar Day, and there's a Thanksgiving Service at Westminster Abbey. Already the advertisements on the sides of buses for Idris Table Waters have been replaced with cheery messages to our Leader. **Greater Britain Thanks You. Here's to the Future.**

My black Daimler sweeps with a stream of others around Hyde Park Corner and through the towering gates to pull up beside the steel flagpoles in front of New Buckingham Place. I wade through a dizzy sense of unreality past the guardsmen in their busbies. I'm giving Monday's suit a trial-airing, and have even placed *News from Nowhere* in the inner pocket to give a similar weight and feel to the pistol.

Dresses rustle as the queue shuffles forward. His Highness the Duke of York stammers slightly as he greets me. I bow. Then his wife the Duchess, and their two plain daughters. A moment later I'm standing before King Edward and Queen Wallis. I glance discreetly to both sides as I bow. It would be easy for me to reach inside my jacket at this point. Click back the hammer as I pull the pistol out. Two shots, minimum, thudding into the chest at close range. Within moments, this whole Place would implode in shatters of glass and steel, drawn up through the skies in a hissing gale, back toward fairyland where it belongs.

The guests wander out through pillared archways into the afternoon's gracious warmth. There's a stir when the silver trays of sweet Merrydown Wine emerge for the loyal toast. The gardens as I explore them still feel a little like Green Park of old. The stepped orchards and monumental statues don't quite fit. The roses that amazingly still bud and flower on the trellises in this bright October sunlight look too red, too raw. You can almost smell the paint, and hear the bellowing voice of the Queen of Hearts. *No! No! Sentence first—*

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verdict afterward. Looking around for something more filling than smoked salmon sandwiches, light-headed as my belly growls and premonitions of pain begin to dance around me, I recognize a famous face.

"Personally, I can't stand fiddling around with plates and standing up at the same time," he says affably. "Strikes me as a foreign habit."

Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright looks small and ordinary in the flesh, almost exactly like his pictures, even without the pipe and the Homburg. In fact, he really hasn't changed that much from the man I glimpsed standing with John Arthur all those years ago at the Cottage Spring. He was probably born cherubically plump, going-on-fifty.

"Hmm. Oxford," he says when I tell him who I am. "You know, I still wish I'd had a university education. And you know John from way back?"

"I taught him briefly when he was a child," I reply, conscious of the rainbowed sun gleaming on Arkwright's blood-threaded cheeks, the strange intensity, even as he chomps cocktail sausages, of his gaze. William Arkwright's the EA's comic turn. He's frequently seen on the arms of busty actresses. But he's Deputy Prime Minister *and* Home Secretary. He's the second most famous face in the country, even if he trails the first by a long way. He can hardly have come this far by accident.

"John's always so quiet about his past—not that you'd believe it if you read the press." Arkwright chews another handful of sausages. "Of course, no one gives a bugger about *my* upbringing. It's called charisma, I suppose. Some of us have to make do with hard work."

"Did you ever think you'd get this far?"

Arkwright tilts his head as the water clatters over the green brass dolphins behind us. "I'm permanently amazed, Mr. Brook. Although I know I don't look it . . ."

I nod. I'd never realized how difficult it is to talk to someone famous, that sense of knowing them even though you don't, and the way Arkwright's looking at me as if there really is something shared between us. . . . Then I realize what's happening—and immediately wish I hadn't. It's there in his eyes. It's in that smile of his and the way he studies me. After all these years, I've finally met someone else who knows the truth about John Arthur.

"What do you think of John Arthur, Mr. Brook? I know it's been a long time, but do you like him personally?"

"He has my . . . admiration."

"Admiration." Deputy Prime Minister William Arkwright smiles at me. "I suppose that's about as much as any of us can hope for. . . ." Then he pretends to see someone else he recognizes over my shoulder, and waddles away.

Much of what happened after John Arthur became Prime Minister seemed so *traditional* that at first even the skeptics were reassured: the marches, the brass bands, the jamborees, and the improvement of the roads and the railways. The arrests certainly came. The few remaining communist and socialist MP's were immediately deprived of their seats—after the years of riots, strikes, and disturbances, that only seemed like a sensible precaution. Left wing newspapers like the *Manchester Guardian* suffered firebomb attacks. The Jews and the Irish were the subject of intimidation. Homosexuals were still routinely beaten up. In many ways, in fact, little had changed.

At this time, Britain was still supposedly a democracy. But John Arthur plainly had little time for the fripperies of a discredited political system. In his first weeks in power, he passed a short Enabling Act that effectively

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meant he could rule by decree. In a country without any written constitution, that was all that was needed.

It was a time of whispers. In schools, there were Modernist masters who would report any colleagues to the EA-dominated Local Education Authorities. Anxious to keep our jobs, the rest of us never quite seemed to realize that we had crossed the line from the truth and had began to peddle lies. Despite the thrill of the fresh new vision that was gripping Greater Britain, as we now called our country, there was an atmosphere of almost perpetual crisis. When I was summoned to the Headmaster's study midway through the 2B's Tuesday morning lesson one day in 1932, all the usual suspicions went though my mind. Poor results, perhaps, in the new Basic Grade exams? My sucking off that foundry worker outside the Bull at Shenstone last Saturday evening? Some new twist of the national curriculum that I had failed to absorb? The *Daily Sketch* and I had already parted company. Once again, I was a nobody, nearing retirement and easily discarded. And behind that, behind it all, was the fearsome burden of what I knew about John Arthur.

"Take a pew, take a pew . . ." The headmaster smiled at me with alarming warmth as I slumped down. "I've received a letter this morning." He rubbed the thick vellum between his fingers as if he still didn't believe it. "From the Vice Chancellor at Oxford, in fact. It seems that they're seeking to widen their, ah, *remit*. Trying to get in some fresh educational blood. Your name, Brook, has been mentioned. . . ."

Back at the New Dorchester, surrounded by bakelite angels, deep fur rugs, soft leather chairs, a huge television set, and an ornate stained-glass frieze depicting Saint George Resting in a Forest, quite unable to rest, I put on my coat and head out into the sprawling London night. The traffic roars by as I cross Westminster Bridge, and the strung lights twinkle along the Embankment. People are *running,* amazingly enough, dressed up like athletes in shorts and vests, and there are accordionists and street vendors, floating restaurants, arm-in-arm lovers, wandering tourists. The newshoardings for the final edition *Evening Standard* proclaim **France and Britain Clash over Egypt**. You can almost feel the news hotting up as the summer cools.

Fairgrounds have been set up in all the parks, and the sickly smell of candy floss spills across all of London. Children, their faces shining with sugar, grease, and excitement, nag their parents for a last ride on one of the vast machines. I find a shooting gallery and aim and shoot, aim and shoot while the couple beside me smear their mouths across each other's faces. *Bang Bang*. Gratifyingly, several of the tin ducks sink down, and my hand hardly seems to be trembling. Further out beyond the tents and the rides lies a great bonfire. Two Spitfires swoop out of the night, agitating the sparks and trailing ribbons of smoke while lads stripped to the gleaming waist climb over each other to make trembling pyramids, marshaled by absurd middle-aged men in khaki shorts and broad-brimmed hats, and I'm enjoying the comedy and pondering the question of what else goes on in those lines of tents, when I sense that I'm being stared at from across the ring. It's Christlow, his face slippery with firelight as he marshals the next shining cluster of Modernist youth. But his eyes flick away from mine when I attempt to smile at him. He looks around as if in panic, then stumbles from sight into the trembling heat.

Everything seems tired now. Lads are yelling fuck-this and fuck-that at each other and the toilet tents have turned nasty. As I limp back along the safe, tramp- and pervert-free streets in search of a taxi, all London is sud-

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denly, dangerously quiet, and seems to be waiting. The night staff at the New Dorchester are out with mops and vacuum cleaners in some of the communal spaces, doing their night duties, and everything in my room is immaculate, unchanged. Saint George is still at prayer in his forest of glass. The sheets of my huge bed are drum-taut. I sleepwalk over to the tall ash-and-ebony cabinet and pour out a drink from the first bottle that comes to hand to help down the tablets. Now, I notice, my hand really is shaking. I reach to the line of buttons and make the lights dim. Saint George fades, the forest darkens.

I lift my old case out from the wardrobe, sliding my hand into the flabby lining and feeling for the gnarled stock of the pistol, conscious of the weight of the metal, the pull of history, gravity, fate. Then—as now seems as good a time as any—I begin to load it. Five bullets are left out of the ten I started with, and they look newer and cleaner than I imagined. I tested the others against a dead tree stump late one evening in Readon Woods when the very stars seemed to shrink back in surprise that the damn things still worked. Now, each remaining one makes a tiny but purposeful click in the cylinder.

It was a cool day when I first arrived at Oxford, with the year's first frost covering the allotments. The sky was pale English blue and beneath it lay everything that I had ever dreamed of or expected. The bells, the bicycles. Christlow. Worn stone steps. Faded luxury. Casement widows. The college principal Cumbernald taking me for lunch at the White Horse jammed between Blackwell's and Trinity as if he really had every reason to welcome me. But by the time we'd opted—yes, why not?—for a third pint of Pedigree, I didn't even feel like an impostor. I felt as if I was gliding at last into the warm currents of a stream along which my life had always been destined to carry me.

I remember that the news vendors were selling a Special Extra Early edition of the *Oxford Evening News* as we walked back along High. Cumbernald bought a copy and we stood and read it together. Other people were doing the same, forming excited clusters, nearly blocking the street. A British Expeditionary Force had landed north of Dublin, and a task-force fleet led by HMS Hood had accepted the surrender of Belfast. All in all, it was a fine day to be British.

More fine days were to follow. There was easy victory in Ireland. The commemorative Victory Tower went up and up in London. I, meanwhile, shivered pleasurably at Christmas to the soaring music of the choir at King's. And for these new and nervous students who entered my rooms clutching essays and reading lists, I became what I had always been, which was a teacher. There were gatherings, paneled rooms, mulled wine in winter, mint teas and Japanese wallpapers in the spring, cool soft air off the river on long walks alone. Greater British forces aided Franco's victory over the communists in Spain. The Cyprus Adventure came and went. We re-took Rhodesia. I bought myself an expensive new gramophone.

The rest of the world found it easier to regard John Arthur as a kind of Fascist straight-man to Mussolini. France, Germany, and the Lowlands were too busy forming themselves into a Free Trade Community while the USA under Roosevelt, when it wasn't worrying about the threat in the Far East from a resurgent Japan, remained doggedly isolationist. In the Middle East, Britain's canny re-alignment of Egypt's King Farouk in the Modernist mold, and his conquest of Palestine with the help of British military advisors, were seen as no more than par for the course in that troubled region. After all, Britain was behaving no more aggressively than she had throughout most of

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history. Even now that the whole of Kent has been turned into a military camp as a precaution against some imagined Franco-German threat, the world still remains determined to think the best of us.

Meanwhile, I grew to love Oxford almost as much in reality as in the dream. Eights Week. The Encaenia Procession. Midnight chimes. The rainy climate. The bulldogs in their bowler hats checking college gardens for inebriate sleepers. The Roofs and Towers Climbing Society.

History went on. The Jews were re-located. Gypsies and tramps were forcibly "housed." Homosexuals were invited to come forward for treatment. Of course, I was panicked for a while by *that*—but by then I had my acquaintance, our discreet messages on the cubicle wall at the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow, our casual buggerings when he'd do it to me first and then I'd sometimes do it to him—my soft and easy life. I had my desk, my work, my bed. I had my books, the tea rooms, the gables, the cupolas, the stares of the Magdalene deer, the chestnuts in flower, music from the windows of buildings turned ghostly in the sunlight, young voices in the crystalline dusk, and the scent of ancient earth from the quads.

I was dazed. I was dazzled. Without even trying, I had learned how to forget.

Six

I am dragged back toward morning by sleek sheets, a clean sense of spaciousness that cannot possibly be Oxford, and an anguished howling. My head buzzes, the light ripples. London, of course. London. The New Dorchester . . . I fumble for my tablets on the bedside table as the sirens moan, and I'm blinking and rubbing my eyes when the door to my room swings open.

"Sorry about this, Brook." Reeve-Ellis leans in. He's already dressed, and has PC T3308 in tow. "Frightful cock-up to have an air raid practice on this of all days. You know what these bongo-bongo players are like—probably think it's the Great White God coming down to impregnate their daughters. There's a good man. Just pop on that dressing gown. . . ."

It's pandemonium along the corridors. People are flapping by in odd assortments of clothing with pillow-creases on their cheeks and electrified hair. Reeve-Ellis steers me down the main stairs, then on through crowds in the main atrium. "A lot easier if we go this way," he says, and he, PC T3308, and I struggle against the flow until we reach an eddy beside the hotel souvenir shop where another PC—he's K2910 according to his shoulder badge—is standing guard at the same door marked **No Admittance** that I was led into two days before. PC K2910 follows us as we go in. The howl of the siren, the sound of people moving, suddenly grows faint. This early in the offices beyond, there are no phones ringing, no typewriters clicking.

"Along here," Reeve-Ellis says, shoving his hands into his cardigan pockets. PC K2910 keeps just behind me. PC T3308 strides ahead and opens another door marked **Emergency Exit Only** that leads to a damp and dimly lit concrete tunnel. It slams shut behind us. Here, at last, the New Dorchester's carpets and luxury give out. The passage slopes down. Water drips from tiny stalactites on the roof. The air smells gassy and damp.

We reach a gated lift which clanks us down past coils of pipework to some kind of railway platform. An earthy breeze touches our faces as we wait and the rails begin to sing before an automatic train slides in, wheezing and clicking with all the vacant purpose of a toy, hauling a line of empty mail hoppers

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with pull-down wooden seats. PC K2910 clambers in first, then helps Reeve-Ellis. I try taking a step back, wondering about escape.

"Might as well just get in, sir," PC T3308 says, offering a large, nail-bitten hand. Hunched in our train as we slide into the tunnel, I'm conscious of my slippered feet, my pajamas beneath the dressing gown. Grey wires along the walls rise and fall, rise and fall. I study the two policemen squatting opposite me in what light there is. PC T3308 is bigger and older, with the jowled meaty face and body of an old-fashioned copper. PC K2910 is freckled, red-headed, thin; he seems too young, in fact, to be a policeman at all.

We disembark at another mail station, and travel upward in another gated lift. Then, suddenly, the walls are almost new—painted the same municipal green that covered the walls of the Gents by Christ Church Meadow. PC T3308 grips my arm. There are doors leading into offices, but the place seems empty, abandoned, and we're still deep underground.

"It's in here." Reeve-Ellis opens a door to an office where there are three chairs and a desk, one battered-looking tin filing cabinet, and fat pipes run across the ceiling.

"You may as well sit down, Brook." Reeve-Ellis points to the chair on the far side of the desk as PC K2910 locks the door behind us, and I notice as my body settles into it that it gives off a sour, unfortunate smell. The air is warm in here, almost swimmingly hot.

"Whatever all of this is," I say, "You should know that I've no close friends or relatives. And I have terminal cancer—you can look it up in my NHS records . . ."

"I'm afraid," Reeve-Ellis says, "that it doesn't work like that."

PC T3308 leans across and lifts my right hand from the arm rest, splaying it palm-up at the edge of the desk. He sits down on it, his fat-trousered bottom pushed virtually in my face. I hear the rasp of a belt buckle, and something jingles. I imagine that they'll start asking me questions at any moment, long before they do anything that might actually case me pain.

"If this is—" I begin just as, with a small grunt of effort, PC K2910 brings the truncheon down across the fingers of my right hand.

Alone now, I can hear Reeve-Ellis's voice as he talks to someone on the telephone in a nearby room. *Yes. No. Not yet. Just as you say* . . . I can tell from the sound of his voice that he's speaking to a superior.

I'm cradling my right hand. It's the most precious thing in the entire world. My index finger is bent back at approximately 45 degrees just above the first joint, and it's swelling and discoloring as I watch. The first and middle fingers are swelling rapidly too, although they could simply be torn and bruised rather than broken.

This is terrible—as bad as I could have imagined. Yet I've had plenty of opportunity lately to get used to pain. The thing about torture isn't the pain, I decide between bouts of shivering. It's the simple sense of wrongness.

The keys jingle. Reeve-Ellis and the two PC's re-enter the room.

"I won't piss you about, Brook," Reeve-Ellis says. "I'm no expert, anyway, at this kind of thing. . . ."

PC K2910 extracts his note pad and pencil. With that freckled narrow face of his, he still looks far too young. PC T3308 and leans back against the wall and nibbles at his nails. A sick tremor runs though me.

"Perhaps you could begin," Reeve-Ellis continues, "by telling us exactly why you're here. What all of this is about . . ."

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"*You* brought me here. I'm supposed to be an honored guest, and then you . . ."

But almost before I've started, Reeve-Ellis is sighing in weary irritation. He's nodding to PC K2910 to find the keys to let him out of the room again. Once he's gone, the two PC's glance at each other, and come around to me from opposite sides of the desk. Their hook their hands beneath my armpits.

"I didn't think this was the sort of thing the London Constabulary specialized in," I say. "I always imagined this was all left to the KSG nowadays."

"Oh, we don't need those fancy boys, sir. Piss-poor at anything from what I've heard. Now, if you'll just stand up . . ."

I try to grab the chair's armrest with the fingers of my good hand, but soon I'm standing upright and the PC's are moving me toward the old grey filing cabinet in the corner of the room. I feel the agonizing pull of my tendons as they hold my damaged right hand over the open drawer. Then PC T3308 raises his boot and kicks it shut.

"These things have a pattern," Reeve-Ellis says, sitting in front of me again. "You have to accept that, Brook. What you must realize is that there's only one outcome. Which is you telling me everything."

A soft click, and there on the table, although stretched and blotched to my eyes as if in some decadent non-realist painting, lies the pistol that I inherited in some other life, some other world, from Francis.

"If you could just tell me how and why you got this thing, and what it was doing in your suitcase."

"It's a relic," I say. "It belonged to a friend of mine who died in the War."

"Can you tell me his name?"

I hesitate. A billow of black agony enfolds me. "Francis Eveleigh. As I say, he's dead."

"Where did he live?"

I tell him the name of the street in Lichfield, and then—what could it matter now?—that of Francis's parents' house in Louth. "It came back with his effects when he died at the Somme."

"And the bullets?"

"They came with the effects as well."

"So it all came to you—" Reeve-Ellis strokes his chin. "This gun, these bullets, as a memento of this Eveleigh fellow? And you've kept them with you ever since?"

"Yes."

"Ever used the gun?"

"No . . . Well, once. I wanted to make sure that it still worked."

"Did it?"

"I'm no expert. It seemed to fire."

"I see. And what did you intend to do with it?"

"What do you think?"

Reeve-Ellis frowns. "I thought we'd got past that stage, old man."

"I intended to kill John Arthur."

Reeve-Ellis nods. He seems unimpressed. Behind him, PC K2910 frowns, licks his pencil, makes a note. Somewhere, a phone is ringing.

"It was Christlow," I say, "wasn't it?"

"Who?"

"Christlow, my scout. He told you about the gun."

"We seem to be forgetting here exactly who is asking the questions." Reeve-

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Ellis smiles. I sense that the two PC's behind him are loosening their stance. Perhaps all this will soon be ending. Then he stands up and nods to them as he leaves the room, even though I'm screaming that I've already told him everything.

But there are more questions, the nightmare of my hand in the filing cabinet again. Pain's a strange thing. There are moments when it seems there has never been anything else in the whole universe, and others when it lies almost outside you. I think of Christ on his cross, of Torquemada and Matthew Hopkins. All those lives. And even now. Even now. In Japan. In Spain. In Russia. In Britain. I'm not lost at all. Not alone. A million twisted ghosts are with me.

I flinch as the lock slides and the door opens. Alone this time, Reeve-Ellis sits down.

"I was once John Arthur's lover," I swallow back a lump of vomit. "I bet you didn't know that?"

Reeve-Ellis frowns at me. A loose scab breaks open as the flesh on my hand parts and widens. The sensation is quite disgusting.

"I was asked to show you these," he says, laying down a brown manila envelope and sliding out four grainy enlargements of faces and upper bodies, all apparently naked. Three are white-lit against a white cloth background; the fourth—a man, I realize when I've sorted out the approximate details of these gaunt, near-bald, blotched, and virtually sexless figures—is standing against a wall. They are each holding in spider-thin hands a longer version of the kind of slot-in numbers that churches use for hymns. My vision blurs. A large part of me doesn't want to recognize these people.

"How do I know," I say, "that they're still alive?"

"You don't."

I gaze back at the photographs. Eyes that fix the camera without seeing, as if they can fill up with so many sights that light is no longer absorbed. My acquaintance, he looks younger, older, beyond time, with the thin bridge of his nose, the ridges of his cheeks, the taut drum-like skin, the sores. His wife, his children, are elfin, fairy people, blasted through into nothingness by the light that pours around them. . . .

"These people—"

"—I was just asked to show you, Brook. I don't know who they are, what they mean to you."

The lock on the door slides back. Both PC's stand close to the wall without a word, watching me and Reeve-Ellis.

"Are you proud of this?" I say to them all. "Is this how you wanted the Summer Isles?"

"Just concentrate on telling us everything, old man." Reeve-Ellis looks weary, defensive, frustrated. In spite of everything, I still have this feverish sense that there's some part of this equation that I haven't yet glimpsed. "Do you really think you could get even *this* close to John Arthur with a pistol unless someone wanted you to? Still, it must have been fun while it lasted, playing your stupid little game."

He picks up the photos, taps them together, and slides them back into the envelope. PC's T3308 and K2910 move toward me, grip me beneath my arms and bear me up toward the filing cabinet once again.

When I've told them more than I imagined I ever knew. When I've told them about Francis Eveleigh and about my acquaintance and about poor

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Larry Black at the Crown and Cushion and Ernie Svendsen who deserves it anyway and all the children I used to teach who I know are grown up by now and culpable as all we British are yet at the same time totally blameless. When I've told them about that time in the twenties when I saw Eveleigh again at the Cottage Spring except he was now really John Arthur. When I've told them everything, I'm suddenly aware of the sticky creak of the chair I'm in, and of the waiting emptiness that seems to flood around me.

"Well . . . ," Reeve-Ellis says. "I suppose we had to get there eventually." He takes PC K2910's notebook. The way he stuffs it into his pocket, I know he's going to destroy it. The two PC's are careful this time. They lift me up almost gently and, amazingly, my limbs still work as we stagger out along the corridor. We come to a door marked **Maintenance Only,** where PC K2910 fiddles with the bolts and swings it open into a shock of night air. I can hear the murmur of traffic as PC T3308 leads me into the darkness, but the sound is distant, shielded on all sides by brick and glass and concrete. The patch of sky is the same shape and color as a cooling television screen—there's even one small dot-like star in the middle. I'd always imagined that my life would end in a prettier place. A remote clearing in some wood in the Home Counties, the cry of a fox and the smell of leaves and moss . . .

I glance back. Reeve-Ellis stands in the lighted doorway, hands stuffed into his cardigan as he leans against the frame. It really is quiet here. The whole of this pre-Trafalgar Day, and the celebratory service I was expecting to attend at Westminster Abbey, has gone by. PC T3308 lets go of me and I sag to my knees, still struggling to protect the precious burden of my hand. I hear the creak of leather as he reaches to release the flap of his holster as somewhere, faintly, dimly, deep within the offices, a phone starts ringing. His breathing quickens.

"Wait!" Reeve-Ellis calls across the courtyard, and his footsteps recede. The night falls apart, pulses, regathers as I breathe the rotten air that my own body is making, trying to wish away this moment, this pain. Eventually, the phone stops. Somewhere across London, a train whistle screams. I think of a rocking sleeper carriage. A man's arms around me, his lips against mine. The gorgeous, shameless openness . . .

Reeve-Ellis's footsteps return, the lines of his body re-shape against the bright doorway.

"There's been," he calls, "a change of plan . . ."

Reeve-Ellis drives a Triumph Imperial, a big old car from the pre-Modernist early thirties with rusty wings and a vegetable smell inside given off by the cracked leather seats. It creaks and rattles as he drives, indicating fitfully, jerking from side to side along the London streets.

"Who was that phone call from?"

"After what you've been through, old man . . . ," he says, stabbing at the brake as a taxi pushes ahead of us. "You really don't want to know. Believe me. Just count yourself as bloody lucky. . . ."

The brightening sky shines greyish-pink on the Thames as we cross Westminster Bridge. At the New Dorchester, the remnants of a fancy dress party are lingering. A Black Knight is clanking around in the remains of his armor while Robin Hood is arguing mildly about some aspect of room service with Reception. We fit in here, Reeve-Ellis and I. He's come as what he is, and I'm something from the War—or perhaps the last guest at *The Masque of the Red Death.*

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Reeve-Ellis punches the button for the lift.

"The message," he says as the lighted numbers rise, "is that you carry on as before."

"What?"

"Today, old man. You still get to see John Arthur. . . ."

We arrive at my floor. My bed has been made, but otherwise nothing has changed since I left here a day ago. The nymphs still cavort across the ceiling. Saint George is still at prayer in his forest.

"Get some rest," Reeve-Ellis advises after summoning the hotel's resident nurse and doctor on the phone. "Watch the parades on television. I'll make sure someone fixes you up and sees that you're ready in time. . . ."

"Those people—the photographs you showed me."

"I don't know."

"And what about you? Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what, old man?"

"This . . ." I gesture wildly about me, nearly falling. "Hell."

"If there is a hell," Reeve-Ellis says, reaching to grasp the handle of the door, "you and me, old man—we'd probably hardly notice any difference. We'd just get on with doing the only things we know how. . . ." Then he closes the door, leaving me alone in my plush room at the New Dorchester. My wristwatch on the bedside table has stopped ticking, but the electric clock on the wall tells me it's just after six in the morning. I make the effort to slide back the wardrobe doors with my left hand and check my suitcase. The scents of Oxford still waft from inside, and everything has been left so neatly that it's almost a surprise to find that the pistol really *is* missing. Clambering to my feet, I swallow a handful of my tablets and study the label on the bottle, although the handwriting is indecipherable. But how would my body react if I took the whole lot? Would that be enough to do it? And the anti-inflammatories, I could take all of those, too. I gaze at the stained glass frieze of Saint George. There's dragon's blood, I notice now, on his praying gauntleted hands. I've been left alone—so perhaps they're expecting this of me; a bid at suicide. But then wouldn't I have been killed already? I throw the bottle across the room with my clumsy left hand. Somehow, it actually hits the frieze, but it bounces off with a dull clunk, raining tablets. Weeping, I scuttle across the floor, picking them up, and collapse on my huge bed.

Beyond my windows, a barge sounds its horn. Lozenges of light ripple and dance with the nymphs on the ceiling. I'd press the button on the headboard that makes the doors slide back, were I able to reach it. I'd like to smell the Thames on what feels like this last of all days, I'd love to hear it innocently lapping. Here in London, it has fostered trade, cholera, prosperity, and been the muse of a thousand poets. There were bonfires upon it in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, so hard did it freeze. . . .

I see myself in front of a class of students once again, speaking these words. Francis Eveleigh is there—he's a young boy, no more than ten, and for some reason his arm is in a sling. And Cumbernald, and Christlow, and Reeve-Ellis, and my acquaintance, and the many other faces that have filled my life.

I smile down at them as they sit with their scabbed elbows and knees, their grubbily cherubic faces, the looming playtime forgotten for a while as they listen. These, I know, are my only moments of greatness. So listen, just listen. All I want to do is to tell you one last tale.

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Seven

Monday 21 October 1940. Trafalgar Day. John Arthur's fiftieth birthday, his silver jubilee. At nine, and under clearing skies even though the forecasts had remained doubtful, the church bells begin to ring out all across the country. There had been talk of rain coming in from the North Sea, driven down over Lincolnshire and across the Fens toward London. But that was just a tease. After a glorious summer of seemingly endless celebrations, no one ever doubted the perfect autumn day this would turn out to be.

By eight o'clock, as the hotel doctor sets and splints my hand and the nurse gags my mouth with a stick to stop me biting my tongue in my agony, trestle tables are being laid in village halls and on dew-damp greens from Mablethorpe to Montgomery, from Treviscoe to Nairn. Balloons are being inflated and jellies turned out onto plates. Guardsmen are polishing their buckles and blancoing their straps while grooms feed and brush their shining mounts. We British are still unsurpassed at doing matters of this sort.

The doctor's manner is brisk—so unsurprised that there doesn't seem to be any point in asking whether he's used to dealing with matters of this sort. And I'm too busy weeping, anyway, until he gives me one last blissfully large injection. Floating, white as angels, the nurse and a hotel steward remain on hand to help me with the tricky process of bathing and dressing. Then I'm placed before my television set, which is already glowing, giving off a smell of warm bakelite and electricity, and my head is supported and my arm is rested. I drift in and out of the rest of the morning on the monochrome visions that come out at me. Already, the ghosts of Empire are moving from Horse Guards Parade, past Admiralty Arch, and along the Mall. Fizzing out at me in shades of grey, they turn at Palace Gardens and march back along the far side of the Mall. The Fourth Infantry. The Gurkhas. The Northamptonshire (Youth) Branch of the Empire Alliance. Bowler-hatted veterans from the War. The Metropolitan Police. The Knights of Saint George.

As noon passes, the King arrives in a white uniform. Pointedly, a gap still remains between him and Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright. It's typical of John Arthur to delay his entrance on this of all days. I can well imagine, in fact, what a delicious luxury it must be to sit in the book-lined calm of his Downing Street study, working quietly through papers while the yearning sea-roar of a whole nation and Empire drifts through the sash windows. It's hard to imagine a greater moment of power. Where to after this, Francis? Oh, *Francis*—despite everything, I almost feel as if I can almost understand . . .

Then he arrives. John Arthur, wearing a plain grey suit, settles into his seat beside the King, and every eye, every camera, and with it, the attention of the whole world, shifts to watch him. The latter part of the parade is more military. It's hard not to be impressed by grey-black tanks of such shining bulk that they leave burning trails behind them on the television, and artillery, and bombers swooping low; the sound of their engines reaching me first overhead, trembling the warm air through my balcony windows. But through everything, even in the long minutes when he's not on the screen, my thoughts remain fixed on that one distant figure. I keep asking how it's possible for one man to change anything. And would I have killed him? I don't know. I don't know. Already, that dream seems as lost and remote as the Summer Isles that Francis and I never got around to visiting.

The procession finally ends at half past four with a final massive *boom,*

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and gouts of cordite and tank exhaust. The air in my room is cooler now, an the sky outside my balcony doors is already darkening.

"Here's the suit, sir, is it . . . ?"

The process of dressing me is more like armoring a knight of old; it woul be easier if we had pulleys and winches. But still we get there, these hote people and I, moving along shifting avenues of pain as the light from the tele vision plays over us. Then triumphal music cuts short and John Arthur sit at his desk in his Downing Street study. His eyes are black pools in the mo ment before the dancing electrons settle in the camera; his silver hair dazzle like wet sand.

"As most of you probably know by now," he begins, arms on the desk, small sheaf of papers in front of him, "today is a special day for me personal ly. As well as celebrating Admiral Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar witl all the majesty our Nation can muster, I must also celebrate my own fiftietl birthday. . . ."

A nostalgic and a personal note, then, to begin with. It must be said though, that John Arthur doesn't look fifty. He doesn't look any age at all The chauffeur touches my good arm, my good shoulder, but I'm still lookin back at the screen as he steers me out into the corridor, trying like the rest o the world to trap a little of John Arthur's light. Outside in the grey Londo dusk, I sink down into the soft hide of yet another Daimler as the Nev Dorchester slides away. Despite everything, I feel a gathering sense of excite ment as, warmly beside me, John Arthur's voice murmurs on the car radio.

"There are signs—indeed, alarming signs—that in Britain itself, this very is land, we must prepare for troubles to come. I heard only this morning tha Presidents De Gaulle and Von Papen have signed a treaty that draws ever closer links between their economies and also those of the Low Countries, unit ing their military forces into what is effectively one vast European army. . . .'

The French-and-German-threat has been a favorite theme in the popula press, but now John Arthur is giving it his own approval. I stare at my chauf feur's close-cropped neck as we drone across the empty tarmac of Westmin ster Bridge, wondering; does he hear those guns, the same grinding engine o history that fills my bones? Much though we British relish the threat of war there is always a strange sense of shifting values when a fresh enemy is de clared. And our main ally in this can only be Stalin's Russia, with Spain, per haps Italy. Such a conflict would drag in America and the Colonies, China expansionist Japan, . . .

We drive along Whitehall as the speech ends in a typically wistful finale All this talk of war seems like a dream as we pass into Downing Street. The old Whip's Office is now the National Headquarters of the Empire Alliance and the traffic and the tourists are kept back by those iron gates, but little else has changed here with the advent of Modernism. A London constable still stands guard at the polished black door of Number 10, just as he has done since Peel introduced them. He doesn't even wear a gun. Inside, the air smells disappointingly municipal—a bit like Oxford—of beeswax and floor polish and fried bread and half-smoked cigars; slightly of damp, even. There are voices. Other people are wandering. I look around, and glimpse one or two of the other nobodies I've come to recognize during my stay at the New Dorchester. I really am back on the tracks of the itinerary that had always been intended for me—*six o'clock, PM meets and greets* . . . It's as if the pistol this hand, never happened. I wander through to an elegant room of wooc panels and mirrors, then out into the Downing Street gardens.

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Seen from the back, with its tall windows, pillars, its wrought iron and its domes, Number 10 looks a small stately home tucked into a quiet side street in the heart of London. The transformation from that terraced front is so much like all the other shams of Modernist Britain that I have to remind myself that the building has been this way since the 1730s. The willows in the garden slump limp and grey, the rose bushes are crumpled fists of paper. Paraffin lamps are carried out, shining on the guests as they move amid the mossy urns and statutes, glinting over the mirror-black waters of the ornamental pool. As they mill and chatter in the hushed tones of visitors to a consecrated building, I follow the gravel path leading to the deeper darkness beside the garden's outer wall.

A small stir arises, followed by lightning blasts of flashbulb, and a grey-haired man of slightly less than average height moves easily amid his people, one to the next, shaking hands. Their voices reach me as wordless calls; cries, murmurs, exclamations. John Arthur's shirt looks incredibly white. The lanterns seem to brighten as he passes them. I imagine my last moment of history as I step toward him from these deeper shadows and he smiles with that warmth of recognition that politicians have. Then the feel and the sound of the gun. *Bang bang*. Blood flowering blackly within the white of his shirt. His eyes fixed on mine, knowing and unknowing as he falls back.

John Arthur seems to glance in my direction as I stand hidden against the dark mass of the ilex tree. Already, discreet KSG minders are shepherding some of the guests back into the house. The garden slowly empties and the voices grow fewer and quieter as damp darkness thickens. I've seen almost all I want to see as John Arthur, arms behind his back now, white cuffs showing, looking a little tired, prepares to follow them. Then he turns and glances back. He takes a step toward the darker reaches of the garden. And I, feeling some impelling force behind me in the night, take a step forward. It's almost as if I'm still being pushed into this moment by the fingers of history.

We meet at the very edge of what remains of the light.

"It *is* you, isn't it?" John Arthur shakes his head. His voice, his whole posture, belong to a far younger man. His hands flutter white, then his eyes flicker down to my sling.

"That was done yesterday," I say, my voice more unsteady than I'd intended. "Your people did it to me when they took away the gun."

"*No*," he shakes his head, his gaze fixing mine so firmly that a tremor runs through me. "It wasn't *my* people, Griff. You were arrested without my authority. . . ."

Griff. A blackbird sings briefly from a bush, but otherwise there is earthy darkness, an implacable sense of silence.

"I heard that you were ill and I wanted to see you. That was all. No one told me about . . ." He runs his hand back though his sleek grey hair. It's a fair impression of distress. "No one told me about the gun. As soon as I heard you'd been arrested, I ordered your immediate release."

I study him. What am I supposed to say?

"Haven't got long to talk now, Griff," John Arthur points toward the house with his thumb. "They'll soon want me back in there."

"I thought you made your own decisions."

He laughs at that. Then he shrugs and shoves his hands into the pockets of his suit. It's a typical gesture of his; we've all seen it a million times. "But, look, I've been thinking about you these last few months. . . ." We are standing barely a pace apart now, yet he looks grainy and grey with the great

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house now glowing behind him. Still less than real. "I'd like for us to talk this evening, have a drink. We could go somewhere, Griff. Just you and I. I could shake this for a while. . . ."

With that, he turns and walks back toward the house. There are many stars kindled overhead now; the night will be crisp and clear. Shadows that I hadn't noticed before separate from the trees and the ancient walls and move toward me. I almost want to run.

John Arthur is silent as he drives swiftly along Horse Guards Parade and then on through clear barricaded side streets. No one turns to stare. The speeding, blank-windowed official car is, after all, commonplace in Modernist Britain.

"You enjoyed the show?"

"The *show?*" I look over at him.

"Of course," he pushes the car faster. "You were here to kill me. . . ."

Drunk and jolly Tommies squat aside the lions as we pass Trafalgar Square. Everywhere, flags are being waved, people are leaning dangerously from windows. There will be deaths tonight. There will be conceptions. On through Covent Garden and across the Strand, then past the Inns of Court. A taxi draws up beside us as we queue to get into Cheapside. Two women in evening clothes are talking animatedly in the back.

"Tell me this, though, Griff," he says, his fingers clenching and unclenching the wheel's stitched leather. "Whatever made you think the world would change if there was no John Arthur?"

"Who would replace you? Jim Toller's too young—and nobody trusts him. People like Smith and Mosley are second-rate politicians. I suppose there was Harrison, but then he was conveniently executed. And we've all been laughing at William Arkwright for years. . . ."

"You shouldn't underestimate Bill. I've kept him close to me because he's the one person I can least trust. You're wrong about it all, in fact, Griff. The military, the bloody establishment. They all want rid of me. Why do you think I made that speech this evening? Why do you think this country has to fight? They're afraid, Griff. All of them are afraid. . . ."

Soon, we are in Whitechapel. He makes a turn and the tires squeal across the wet cobbles, then rumble to the curb of a dead end beside a scrap of wasteground. Clinging to my dignity, not waiting for him to come and help me, I climb slowly out. It's cold and dark here. The ground is sticky with litter and the air has a faintly seasidey smell of coal smoke and river silt. John Arthur opens the rear door and takes a hat from the back seat—an ordinary-looking trilby—then a dark overcoat, which he pulls on, raising the collar.

"There," he says, turning with his arms outstretched, "who would recognize me?" The transformation is, of course, complete.

My walk is slow and labored as we head past the terraced houses, and John Arthur helps me by snaking his arm around my back to support some of my weight, giving me a little lift as we step over a pothole and up onto the loose beginnings of a pavement. In odd, flashing moments, he feels almost like Francis. His breathing and way he walks is almost the same, and his skin, beneath everything, still smells faintly of burnt lemon.

Soon, we're drawing close to the sidings, tracks, and cliff-face brick warehouses of the docks, where local people have gathered for a view of the fireworks above the Thames. Mothers in slippers with scarves wrapped over their curlers. Men with fags behind their ears and the stubble of a day off

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work peppering their chins. They *Ohh* and *Ahh* as the sky crackles and the colors shine in gutters and ignite the myriad warehouse windows. No one notices John Arthur and I as we slip between them. He's just a slight middle-aged man helping his invalid father.

A little away from the crowd, tea chests lie heaped beside a wall. I slump down even though the air is sour here, and John Arthur sits beside me. In shadow, he risks taking off his hat, gestures toward the crowd. "They all seem so happy," he says. "A few drinks, a bed, food, some flesh to hold, some bloody fireworks . . ."

"They worship you."

"*Do* they? You tell me, Griff. You're the historian." He looks at me challengingly then, does this ex-lover of mine—does this John Arthur, and something chill and terrible runs down my spine. Now, powerless as I am, I'm sure that I was right to try to kill him. "It's not enough, is it? After what we went through. I thought it might be enough when I first visited Dublin after the victory. And then again when word came through from Rhodesia." He shakes his head as sulfurous plumes of red smoke drift over London. "You don't know what the War was like, Griff. No one does who wasn't there. . . ."

He's leaning forward now, eyes fixed on nowhere as the flashes of light catch and die over the planes of his face, the silver of his hair, his elbows resting on his knees as he grips the rim of his hat, turning it over and over.

"It was all so easy when I enlisted," he says. "There were men chatting with each other on the train as it took us down to this big park north of Birmingham. Suddenly we were all the same—bosses and laborers. . . . I was a rifleman, Griff. Third best shot in the training battalion when the Lee Enfields finally arrived. Went to France in December as part of Kitchener's First Army. . . . And don't believe any of the bloody rubbish about King and Regiment and Country, Griff. You fight for the bloke who's standing next to you. You put up with all the mud and the lice and the officers and the regimental bullshit for their sake."

"It must have been terrible."

"It wasn't terrible. Don't give me that. It wasn't terrible at all. I've never laughed more in my life, or felt more wanted, more as if I *belonged*. The rain. The rats. The mud. It was all like some stupid practical joke. And it was quiet a lot of the time and there were empty fields where you could lie down in the evening and stare up at a perfect sky. Then down to the town, most us of half-drunk already, and the fat white mademoiselles spitting on their fingers and saying *laver vous*. Yes, Griff, I did that too. And I had friends, mates, encounters. There were places. Nobody cared . . ." He stares down, his silvered head bowed as the rockets whoosh and wheel, scrawling out the sky.

"We were sent to the Somme in June 1916. It was supposed to be the big push that would win the War, but we knew that we were just covering a French cock-up. I lay awake that last night. We all knew we were going over the top in the morning. Not that they told you, but you could tell from the guns. I couldn't sleep. Boom, boom, and the stink of the trenches. Boom, boom, boom. Then the big guns stopped, and that silence was the worst thing of all. We were moved up to the front line. Thousands, thousands of us. And there was silence, just men breathing and the shuffle of our feet on the duckboards and the creak and jingle of our packs. And for the first time, I knew that I'd lost it. I felt terribly afraid.

"The whistle went and men started to climb out of the trenches. A lot of them just fell back, and I thought they were being clumsy until I realized they'd been

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shot already. And I just stood there. It was the worst moment of my life but I knew I couldn't go back, so I started to climb up out of that trench. My mates were already running around the pool of a big shell hole miles ahead, but I was just wandering in a nightmare, looking for somewhere to hide. . . .

"I don't know when I got hit, Griff—or how long it took. But there was this heat across my side as I slid down into this long hollow. I knew it wasn't that bad . . . I could have gone on, Griff. I could have climbed out of that ditch and gone on. But I didn't. I just crouched there the whole day. Boom, boom—I could hear the shells whistling over. The bullets rattling. But I was alone with my fear, Griff. Quite alone.

"Darkness came and the flares went up. Men with stretchers found me and hauled me out, and I looked enough of a mess to be convincing as I was taken back to the field dressing station. I was given some water and a jab of morphine and quinine and carried across the fields to a big river barge just as dawn was coming. You could still smell the coal that they'd cleared out of the barge beneath all the other stench, and you could hear the water laughing around the sides as we pulled away from the jetty.

"A few men were crying and moaning. A lot were comatose or simply asleep. There was a man with his head half-blown off on the stretcher nearest to me. He couldn't possibly live, his brains were coming out, and then he started this terrible moaning. He was trying to speak, but his jaw was so wrecked I couldn't understand what he was saying. Something *K* and something *M*. His limbs were jerking and this noise he was making just went on and on. It was a sound out of hell. Then I looked at him again with the top of his skull ripped off like an egg, and I realized what he was saying. He was saying, *Kill Me. . . .*"

"I managed to stand up, and he seemed to quieten for a moment then, and look back up at me from his ruined face with his one good eye. I took strength from that, and I understood that what he wanted was what you'd do for any mate of yours in the same position. He had a pistol on his belt, but I knew that it was too late to use it here. And I was still lost, still afraid. In fact, it seemed as if was *his* strength that enabled me to take the blanket from by his feet and push it down over his face and hold it there. Of course, he began to fight and buck after a while—it takes longer than you'd imagine to kill a man—but eventually he stopped struggling, And I was glad that I still had this one soldierly act left in me. I knew that he'd died a hero's death, this man. This *soldier*.

"Perhaps it was that or the drugs I'd been given which made me do what I did next. I don't know. I felt for the waxed envelope that they'd tied to his tunic at the dressing station. His name was John Arthur, and he was a private in the Staffordshires like me, although from a different battalion. And it struck me that John Arthur was a good name for a soldier, a good name for a man. I'd always hated being Francis Eveleigh, anyway. It was all done in that moment, in the foul air of that barge with the water laughing beside me, swapping names just to see how it felt to become him. And straight away, you know, as I lay down again on my pallet and the fever began to take a bigger hold, it felt better. . . ."

John Arthur is silent for a moment as the sky above London foams with light, pushing at us like a wind.

"Didn't anyone ever suspect?"

"The rest of my platoon had been wiped out. So had John Arthur's. And I caught pneumonia, you see, Griff, so I was shipped back to England. By the

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time I was finally ready for active duty again, I could have been anyone for all the difference it made. So I went back to the front as S4538 Rifleman Arthur, D Company 7th Service Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, and I knew from the first time I heard the guns that this time it would be better, this time I wouldn't feel any fear. I was even made corporal, and I won the George Cross. . . . But that's common knowledge."

"What was it like when the War ended?"

"I went up to Raughton, which was John Arthur's last address before enlisting. I found out that the Yorkshire accent I'd copied from one of the cooks was all wrong, but that didn't matter. We were like ghosts. Nobody seemed to belong anywhere then. The place was just a pit village and the address was a cheap boarding house. One or two people told me they remembered him, but I never really knew if they did. He'd been slightly older than me, but seemed to have made little impression on the world. His father had been an itinerant who'd started out in the West Country and had died in a mining accident. . . .

"But I knew I had to do something more with this new life John Arthur had given me. Do you understand that, Griff? So I jumped on a cattle truck, took the train down to London. It was cold that winter and there was the flu epidemic. Each morning under the bridges and in the shop fronts, a few extra bodies didn't wake up. And the men in suits and the women in hats who'd never done anything but complain about the rationing just wrinkled their noses and stepped over them. And there were queers like you, Griff, who'd get a man to do anything for the price of a meal. And fat cats and Jews. And the bright young things. And the colonels who were back from the War, jingling with medals and a big pension.

"But I still remembered I was John Arthur. And I began to meet people who understood that there was nothing left in all the lies that had once kept this country afloat. And you saw what it was like—Griff, that night fifteen years ago. You saw how easy it is to *be* John Arthur. He was always waiting there. Even now, he's leading me on."

The big display is reaching its climax. Even here, what must be two miles off, there's a sweet-sour reek of gunpowder as the flares blossom overhead. John Arthur puts his trilby hat on, straightens it, checks that his coat collar is still up, and offers me his hand again. "Come on, Griff, I'll buy you that drink. . . ."

I let him help me up, and an elderly woman in a hairnet and a housecoat glances across the road. Her hand goes up to her mouth for a moment, childlike in wonder. Is it? But no, no . . . it couldn't be. Relieved, she looks back toward the crackling sky.

John Arthur breathes easily beside me, helping me along as I wonder what I should say, what horrors I could tell him that he doesn't know already, what questions should I ask. But it's like all those letters that I never wrote to him. It's like all the promises of love that, even in that brief, glorious time when Francis and I were alone, were never given. It's like my unwritten book. It's like my whole life.

The sky is on fire now. The houses look flash-lit, pushed back into skeletons of their real selves. I stumble as renewed pain shoots through me. Our two linked shadows leap, burned and frozen ahead into the pavement, and it seems that we're at the lip of a vast wave that will soon break through everything, dissolving, destroying. Then, with one last final bellow, the display ends and we move on through the East End, the ordinary East End of London in this night of the 21st of October 1940, beneath a bruised sky, in shocked, blotchy darkness.

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A public house juts at the triangular meeting of the two streets facing toward the Mudchute and the Isle of Dogs. The sign is unilluminated, painted in dark colors. If I didn't know this place already, I probably wouldn't be able to make out the words **Cottage Spring**. The room inside is smaller than the place I remember stumbling into fifteen years before. But I recognize the counter that John Arthur leapt onto, and the pattern of the mirror, now cracked, that lies behind it; there, even, is the fat pillar in the corner that I once hid behind.

There's a moment of bizarre normality as John Arthur takes off his hat, lowers his coat collar, and walks up to the bar. Two cloth-capped men are playing darts, while three underage lads sit nursing their pints, and an old man stares at his evening glass of stout. They're some of the few who couldn't be bothered to see tonight's fireworks, or even watch them at home on TV, and it's amusing to observe their reactions as they realize who's just come in. There's puzzlement, doubt—like that old woman by the docks—followed by that standard British reluctance to make a fuss.

"I'll buy everyone their next round," John Arthur says, speaking with that soft Yorkshire accent: the very image of himself, and suddenly, they're all clustered around him, breathless and eager like children at a fête when Father Christmas finally arrives. John Arthur signs beer mats, he laughs and shares a joke. He really is John Arthur now, and these are his people. The old man downs the rest of his stout, spilling most of it down his shirt, and quavers that he'd like another. The lads ask for halves of ginger beer, which John Arthur laughingly changes to the pints of Fuller's that they were on before.

Outside, word of who's here must have got out, for there are children's and women's voices, the shadows of raised hands and heads shifting across the frosted windows. And I'm just standing here, tired and in pain. Drained of anger. Drained of hope. Soon to be drained of life. I shuffle closer to that pillar at the end of the bar, in need once more of its reassuring anonymity. John Arthur's forgotten about me anyway. *These* are his people. *This* is where he belongs. I'm just a name from the past that he couldn't remember well enough to get right when he made his speech to the Parliament that he later dissolved. A phone begins to ring at the back of the pub, unanswered. Somewhere, a car engine is racing.

The voices of the men are easier now. Yes, they realize, he really is just as everyone says; an ordinary bloke you could share a drink with. John Arthur looks across as the roar of an approaching car fills the street. He seems to notice me now almost as he did all those years ago. It's as if nothing has ever changed. But this time, somehow, his smile is more genuine, and as he walks over with his arms a little apart, I can't help but smile back at him.

There comes a sharp sound of banging, and the thought passes, too quickly to be fully-formed, that the fireworks have resumed. Then, one by one, the frosted windows of the Cottage Spring begin to fall in. They burst into shining veils, and splinters of wood fly out as the room explodes in a reflecting spray of collapsing mirrors. The men at the bar are jerked, thrown back, lifted. The glass is like a great watery tide, rolling and rising. John Arthur pirouettes as the last window explodes and the shining air flowers silver and red around him, then the pillar I'm beside splatters and streams before everything stops and fills with sudden, terrible silence.

As I look down at this shattered place and these broken dolls lying on the crimsoned linoleum, there comes a sudden crash as the last of the big mirrors falls, and faint, at the very edge of everything, are the sounds of crying, fum-

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bling, moaning, weeping. Then the roar, once again, of that car. Gears smash as it turns, and I wait for more bullets, but instead something large and metallic flies through a gaping window. A thick, round-cornered box with a single wire protruding, it hits an upended table and skids hissing through the sparkling wreckage to settle beside Francis's body.

Then the car pulls away with a screech of tires in the last moment before the world erupts into darkness.

Eight

Every morning now, I awake not knowing who or where I am, filled with a vague sense of horror and helplessness. I do not even know if I am human, or have any real identity of my own. For a moment then, I am under the rubble again and Francis is beside me. His hand is in mine, and flutters like an insect in the moment that he dies. My life seems to float out in both directions from that point. It's like unwrapping a complex present; tearing away at silvery ribbons of the future and the past, although I know that it's all just some trick—a party game—and that I will be left clutching nothing but tangled paper, empty air.

I ungum my eyes and look out at the world, accepting the strange fact of my continued existence. But it remains a slow process even though this beamed ceiling is familiar to me; fraught with a sense of aftermath. I am Brook, yes, I am Geoffrey Brook. I am a lecturer, a teacher—in fact, a true Professor of History now. And Oxford, yes, Oxford.

I feel for my glass, my tablets, which lie a long way beyond the Chinese pheasants cavorting on my eiderdown. I sense that it is early, still dark outside my window, although a strange light seems to wash up from the quad and there is a chill to the air beyond the crackling heat of my fire. Somewhere across the rooftops and towers, a bell, distant yet clear, begins to chime the hour. When silence and equilibrium return, I slide inch by inch across the sheets until my feet drop off the edge of the bed. I am old, I think. I am old. Perhaps that is the last shock I have been waiting for.

Bunioned, barefoot, trying not to exhaust myself by coughing, I stumble through the cavorting firelight toward my window, dribbling fingers of condensation as I wipe the mullions with my wrecked and arthritic right hand and gaze at the strange whiteness. It has snowed again in the night. Of course. This is Oxford and it has snowed again in the night. . . . I have to close my eyes, then, as a twinge of pain and the rawness in my throat sets off another ugly memory.

I remember everything now. I am here. I am alive. This is the last day of the year of 1940. John Arthur is dead.

I'm still leaning there, still staring from my college window in a drugged half-doze, when the breakfast trolley rumbles toward my door. The knock sounds hesitant, mistimed, yet still I'm somehow expecting Christlow as the handle turns and the chill outer air touches my skin. But it's Allenby.

"Good morning, Professor. Terrible lot of snow in the night as you've doubtless seen. Got a nice fire going for you earlier while you were still asleep. . . ." He slips my padded silk dressing gown from the hook near the fire where it's been warming. His breath is cool on my neck as he helps me into it; like the sense of the snow. He bends down to sheathe my feet in lambskin slippers.

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He's young and good-looking, is Allenby. He says all the right things; he doesn't even wear an EA badge. But he still seems like a barely competent actor, forever trying and failing to find the essential meaning of his role.

"You've got that appointment, by the way."

"Appointment?"

"Twelve o'clock at the George Hotel. Miss Flood is coming up from your publishers in London."

Then he lays the morning's papers out before me. Sheet upon warm rustling sheet that smell crisply of ink and freshly felled wood; all that history in the making. I'm tempted to ask Allenby to take the damn things away, but I know that that would seem ungrateful. And there's something—I remember now—something that still pricks my interest, although as yet I can't quite recall what.

I reach out toward the table, using my right hand like a scoop to push the *Times* into the better grip of my left. **PM Announces Immediate Inquiry into Scandal of Jewish Homeland. RAF Airlifts Aid**. The photograph beneath shows a group of people huddled outside a rough hut. They are skeleton-thin, clothed in rags. I raise it closer to my eyes, so close that their faces become collections of printed dots.

My college Daimler slides through the slush along High, Catte, and Broad. We park at the corner of George Street and the Cornmarket, where my driver helps me out onto the oystered ice of the pavement and leads me into the Ivy Restaurant. The colors that the snow and the cold have bleached out of Oxford all seem to have fled into these rooms. The ceilings are pink, the walls lean with gilded mirrors, there are flowers at every table. As is often the case now, rumor of my arrival has spread before me, and I must wait and smile and raise a trembling hand in acknowledgment as the dining room erupts into applause. But the moment isn't over-played as I shuffle toward the best table by the window where Miss Flood awaits me.

Her bracelets jangle as she sips her wine. Her fingers are restless as she picks at a bread roll, missing the chains of cigarettes that, since I succumbed to a coughing fit at one of our early meetings, she refrains from smoking in my presence.

"I was speaking to Publicity only yesterday, Geoffrey," she tells me. "And you're definitely the flagship of our spring list."

"That's good to know . . . ," I wheeze. "I received your letter with the, er, galleys only the day before yesterday."

"Try not to think of them as *galleys* or *proofs,* Geoffrey. Think of them as . . ." Miss Flood waves her hand, clutching an imaginary cigarette. "Complimentary reading material." She smiles.

I nod. What she means is that she wants to keep me well away from the tricky business of correcting my own scholarly inaccuracies, my ungrammatical turns of phrase.

Miss Flood delves into her briefcase and shows me a glossy mock-up of the dustjacket. The first print run is thirty thousand, with the presses ready to roll with another thirty thousand after that. You'll never know from the look of this book that Miss Flood's other major authors write do-it-yourselfs and whodunnits. I really can't complain.

"As to the title," she says, tapping the celluloid with a scarlet fingernail, "you'll see that we've stuck with our original idea. That, er, *other* suggestion that you made. Good though it was, I'm afraid that it didn't quite *click* with

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our marketing people. *Fingers* of History was too close, if you see what I mean. There are a lot of people out there who still remember your work and who'd love to have a hardback copy of your best articles. . . .

Figures of History
Geoffrey Brook

"Oh, and we've finally cleared up the copyright business. Being who you are, Geoffrey, I really didn't think that the people at the *Sketch* would resist. But we'll need to hurry you . . . ," Miss Flood says more quietly, slipping in the words when she imagines that I'm not really conscious as I gaze out of the window at the snow-softened spires, domes, towers of this city. Balliol, All Souls, Queens . . . the litany of my dreams . . . "If we're going to squeeze in that new extra chapter you were talking about."

"I've decided," I squeak, "what I want to write about. It fits in with research I was doing into the history of the Jews." *Jews* . . . My voice sounds even lighter than ever as I end the sentence, and I'm sure that the restaurant conversations fade around me. "What with all the fuss there's been in the papers these last few days about the Highlands . . ." Something sticks and crunches in my throat. "I was thinking . . . thinking that the time is right to remind people . . ."

"Geoffrey, that sounds *fascinating*." Pause. "Although everyone's hungry to hear more about your links with John Arthur."

"Of course."

"Not that I want to steer you in any particular direction."

My eyes are watering. My nose is starting to run. I fumble to find a clean corner of my handkerchief as I begin to cough and the chime of bells and the clatter of lunchtime cutlery, the waitresses' whispering and the taste of the wine and the smell of the cooking and the clangor in the kitchens and the whispers in ancient corridors and the scent of old stone and fresh snow, the dreaming towers of these rabbithole rooms—the sense of all Oxford—fractures around me.

Geoffrey Brook was born in Staffordshire, Lichfield, in 1875. He has devoted most of his life to teaching history, firstly in and around the City of his birth, where he influenced the young John Arthur, and later in his life at one of the most distinguished and ancient Oxford colleges. . . .

Running my pen through the word *ancient,* scratching a question mark over *distinguished,* I close the file of publicity material as my college Daimler hisses slowly along High. Already, it's getting dark and the lights in the shop windows are glowing. Prices have gone up a lot recently—taxes, as well—and you'd think that people would have had enough of shopping after the frenzied weeks before Christmas. But the windows offer **Biggest Ever Sale** and **Huge Post-Xmas Discounts,** even though it won't be twelfth night until Sunday.

My college tower looms and the chill air bites as I dismiss my driver and wade unaided across the snowy quad. Wheezing, I slump down into one of the leather armchairs beside the fire in my rooms and drag my telephone, a new privilege, onto my lap and stab and turn, stab and turn, dialing out a number from the back page of the *Times,* willing all the ghosts of history to give me strength, and trying to picture a bustling newsroom filled with the same clean purposeful smell as the papers Allenby brings me. . . .

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But today's New Year's Eve, and there are no newspapers tomorrow. The telephone just rings and rings.

The world already knew that John Arthur was dead by the time I was hauled out from the rubble of the Cottage Spring. I could hear it in the crowd's sobbing howls as the masonry slid and crumbled, and in the firemen's angry voices.

One of the beer-drinking lads survived for two nights at Barts inside an iron lung. Another remains alive to this day, though a mindless cripple. There were also many deaths and disablements amid the onlookers who'd gathered in the street outside. Only I, Geoffrey Brook, protected by that pillar—and, perhaps, in some strange way, by the fact that I was already close to death—truly survived. I suffered a gash along my cheek that required five stitches, a dislocated shoulder, two septic lungfuls of plaster. Of course, I had my bad right hand already, although that fact often feels as lost to me as it is to the rest of the world.

Even as I was carried to the ambulance, the flashbulbs were popping, the television lights were glaring. Three days later, as I lay propped up in my hospital bed, smoothed and groomed, sweetly drugged, the new Prime Minister William Arkwright called by at my hospital room. The flashbulbs of the many newsmen he'd brought with him popped and crackled as he shook my good left hand and grinned around his pipe. He already seemed bigger than the man I'd met in the gardens of New Buckingham Palace. "And it's Professor Brook from now on," he said as he picked up his trademark Homburg hat from my bed. "Did I mention that just now? No matter—it'll be in all tomorrow's papers."

John Arthur's death is already as much a part of his myth as everything that happened during his life. This time, unlike the fire at Old Buckingham Palace—and unless Jim Toller and the several senior officers of the KSG commit suicide in their cells—there will even be a trial. The national mood is predominantly one of sadness and disillusion. EA badges are less frequently worn, and KSG officers suffer children's jibes as they walk the streets, implicated as they all are by association in the death of our great leader. And the British economy, it seems, is far weaker than we ever imagined, damaged by ten years of over-expenditure. Conscription is being phased out, and negotiations with France and Germany about mutual disarmament will commence in February. There is even talk—oblique, as yet—of giving India and Ireland a semblance of Home Rule, and fresh elections for a new People's Assembly.

All the rest, that last glorious summer of hope and expansion, already feels like a dream. After all, the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place—Japan has attacked China, Stalin has annexed eastern Poland—and it's obvious that the countries of Western Europe must draw together if they are not to be swept away by Communism and a commercially belligerent America. John Arthur's threats toward France and Germany, his canny alliance with Stalin, have simply given us a top seat at the table in the negotiations to come.

I found that his picture had vanished from the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow when I made my recent farewell visit there, although the nail-marks that I and my acquaintance made in the third cubicle remain. Somehow, as I touched their soft indentations, they spoke to me of nothing but hope and human decency.

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The Cumbernalds' house shines out amid a spray of car headlights as I arrive that evening.

"All terribly kitsch, I know," Eric Cumbernald assures me as I hobble past the flashing fairy lights in the front porch. "Everyone's waiting for you. . . ."

Within moments, I'm surrounded, touched, smiled at, reminded of previous meetings and promises of lunch. Grateful for the armor of my tablets, I shuffle across the carpets toward the largest and most inviting-looking chair. Cumbernald brings me a sweet sherry and a Spode plate with a sausage roll and the crowd around me thins as it becomes apparent that I'm not responding to their questions. From being a living link to John Arthur, I'm demoted to being an old relic, to be touched for luck, then forgotten. Music plays. The fire flickers. The Christmas decorations turn and sway. There are many hours to go yet before midnight and the coming of 1941.

Eileen Cumbernald sits for a while on the arm of my chair, brown as ever in a low-backed dress. Her husband Eric's impending promotion to Vice Chancellor of Oxford University has left her totally unchanged.

"I *so* enjoyed that time we spent together at Penrhos," she tells me. "You really *must* come down with us again next year. . . ."

I have to smile. It's funny, how people choose to ignore my obvious physical decline. I suppose that they imagine it's only natural. In fact, it would be wrong for me to appear too hale and hearty after surviving an explosion that killed John Arthur.

"You're even *more* like dead Uncle Freddie now!" Barbara Cumbernald declares delightedly as she imprisons me in her hot arms while Christine hangs back a little, looking just as pale and hot as her sister, but more clearly the eldest now. "Will you tell us one of your funny stories?"

"Why don't you both tell *me* a story instead?" I suggest. "Tell me what you know about John Arthur."

"John Arthur," Barbara intones, her arms still around me, smelling of wine and sweat and toffee, "died a hero's death as we as a Nation celebrated Trafalgar Day. Bad people who wanted to—" But at this point, Christine begins to tickle her, and they collapse on the floor in a squealing heap.

Will the Cumbernalds' stay in this house on Raglan Street, I wonder, in the wake of Eric's promotion and the knighthood that will almost certainly follow? With the billiard room and the conservatory, the hugely expensive kitchen I got a glimpse of, they've clearly got things here exactly as they want them. But they will move, of course, ever-upward toward some semi-stately home. They'll continue to swim the warm English currents until age and frailty finally catch up with them. They'll probably even accept death with good grace—just like me, they'll have no cause to complain about the way history and these Summer Isles have treated them.

Me, I really am a full Professor now. And MA, Modern History, from my own college, too. As Cumbernald has carefully explained, my Master's can be seen as either honorary or de-facto depending upon the angle from which you choose to view it. The thing often switches back and forth even in my own befuddled mind—a strange state of existence that I suspect the scientists you used to hear about a few years ago would recognize from their studies of the hints and glimmers that apparently make up our universe. We're barely there, it seems, if you look closely enough; just energies and particles that don't belong in a particular time or place. Stare at the world too hard, breathe at it from the wrong direction, and it falls apart. Explodes.

* * *

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Christlow was found drowned on a muddy bank of the Thames down by the Isle of Dogs the morning after the Cottage Spring. A presumed suicide, there were whispers on the Oxford grapevine of evidence found in his rooms of preferences that should never be entertained by a man who works with children.

I don't doubt, in fact, that he was following me. Where and how it began, and whether he always knew of my sexual dalliances, I will never know. But I'm also sure that he found the pistol in the suitcase beneath my bed. No doubt he imagined he was doing no more than his patriotic duty by reporting this fact, and my movements. But here the picture grows fuzzy, unscientific, unhistoric . . .

My thoughts always come back to the man who has most plainly benefited from John Arthur's death. More than ever now, it's clear that we all underestimated William Arkwright. He's a consummate survivor, a dealer and a fixer, a betrayer, a *politician* in the sense that John Arthur—who lived, for all his faults, by the heart, by the flame and the fire—never was. It must have been plain to Arkwright long before it was to the rest of us that Modernism was in crisis, seduced by its own myth, in danger of launching itself into economic catastrophe and a disastrous European war. So perhaps Arkwright finally persuaded the relics of an establishment that is now resurgent that enough was enough. As even the arrest of Jim Toller and his senior KSG colleagues acknowledges, John Arthur's death was executed too professionally to be the work of mere fanatics.

From this, I soon find myself taking the kind of wild flights that, even when I was spinning through the most dangerously speculative pages of my long-projected book, I would never have considered undertaking. History—the only kind of history, anyway, that anyone ever cares about—is always reducible to solid facts that can be learned by students in hour-long lessons and then regurgitated in exams, or used to add color to television dramas, or as the embroidery in escapist novels. But what could have been more convenient than to have some dying madman kill John Arthur, alone and unaided? So I wasn't arrested. I remained an idea to be toyed with—or at least not discarded until the last appropriate moment. Even as I wandered the gardens of New Buckingham Palace, it was still quite possible that I would be allowed access to John Arthur with my gun. After all, there was no particular reason why I shouldn't succeed, other than the question mark that hung over my own character. And whom should I meet there amid the terraced fountains, but none other than William Arkwright?

It was then, I think, that I was finally weighed in the balance and found lacking. Arkwright ordered that I be arrested by his own officials, perfunctorily questioned to make sure I wasn't hiding anything, then shot while more reliable contingencies were put in hand. Only some chance enquiry from John Arthur's office about my whereabouts—that midnight phone call echoing in that shaft between the buildings—saved my life.

Did John Arthur know that an assassination attempt was likely? Was it I who led him to his killers at the Cottage Spring? But no, no. All of this is too fantastic—worse than those dreadful Modernist books that I forced myself to read. The fact is that I will never know. Perhaps in years to come when the truth is no longer potent, some hack or scholar will come up with a theory that questions the role of Jim Toller's KSG in John Arthur's death. They may even stumble across the strange fact that another figure, an obscure populist academic named Brook, was arrested in possession of a gun. Odder still, this

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Brook character was then released and was with John Arthur at the time of his death—survived, even, the bullets and the explosion. I cannot imagine what threads they will draw out from these odd facts. Of their nature, the true conspiracies are the ones that are least likely to be unearthed in the future. The truth, at the end of the day, remains forever silent. We are only left with history.

"*There* you are, Brook!" Cumbernald looms from the ceiling decorations and lays his hand on my shoulder. "Can't just drift off like this, you know. There's a phone call for you. A Miss *Flood*."

My knees pop and crack like tiny fireworks as he helps me up. His right arm supports me as he leads down the corridor. "You can take it in here in my study," he says, pushing open the door, watching for a few moments as I settle down on a new leather chair to make sure that I know how to operate this fancy-looking phone of his.

"*Geoffrey,* there you are!" Miss Flood sounds excited. "I got your number here from that creepy chap who works for you at the college."

"*Christlow?*"

"Whatever. I've marvelous news, Geoffrey. . . ."

I wait as Miss Flood burbles on, studying the ample bookshelves that cover these study walls (mostly do-it-yourselves and whodunnits, a few biographies and thin histories; a small space where my own forthcoming work will fit in easily), doing my best to banish the sense of gloomy premonition that still comes over me when people announce they have news.

". . . so Arkwright's own Private Secretary asked if it wasn't too much of a presumption. I mean, as if we'd really *mind.* Of course, we'll have to re-do the dustjacket to give his name due prominence. . . ."

"You mean Arkwright is—"

"—Yes, going to write an Introduction to your book! I know, I know. I still haven't got over it either. I haven't even started to *think* what this'll do to the print runs! Of course, it means that you, Geoffrey, can relax. You won't have to write *a thing more* . . ."

Part of me drops away as I gaze down at the receiver. There are two ways, I decide, to gain a person's silence and compliance. You either take away their lives and scrub out their identity. Or you give them everything.

"So that's it, then?"

"Marvelous! And Happy New Year. Oh, Geoffrey . . . not that it matters now as far as the book's concerned, but I do have a contact for that research you were talking about. Someone in the Government who's co-ordinating the Jewish relief effort."

I cradle the phone between my shoulder and chin, searching the leather-and-ash expanse of Eric Cumbernald's desktop for something resembling a pen or a pencil. I begin to write out the number and the name that Miss Flood dictates in my left-handed scrawl, then stop half way and put down the phone without wishing her goodbye.

"Everything okay in there?" Cumbernald asks. His eyes travel down to my bit of paper. "If you want to make another call . . ."

"I don't think I'll bother."

"In that case . . ." He slides back a cabinet front to reveal a television screen surrounded by nests of equipment, "there's something I'd very much like to show you. . . ."

I crumple the note as the comforting smell of warming valves slowly fills

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the room. The name Miss Flood's given me of the Home Office official who's overseeing the operation to provide food, medical treatment, and shelter to the Jews is Reeve-Ellis. The television screen snows. Then there are ghostly figures that make me think of my acquaintance and his family, huddled in their crude huts or blanketed in the hurricane wilderness. Of course, the Government has come to their rescue now. The terrible situation has been proclaimed by Ministry of Information Press Release, and the newspapers have lapped it up unquestioningly. Soon, it will be dealt with, and—a little sadder, a little wiser, a little less trustful—we Britons will watch the results on the BBC News. This Jewish Scandal has come at just the right time. It shows Arkwright as a man of honesty who is prepared to deal with the aberrations that so blackened Modernism's reputation in the rest of the world. It may even get us back into the League of Nations. In a few months—or years, perhaps, depending upon political contingencies—a similarly narrow spotlight will fall upon the treatment camps in the Isle of Man. But, even if my acquaintance and his family have survived, angel of death that I am, I realize that I must never try to contact them.

Cumbernald places a large silver disk on a spinning turntable. "I had the cine-recording transcribed to video," he explains as I watch the jumpy white outlines of Eileen, Christine, Barbara, and myself sitting outside the summer lodge in Penrhos Park on the television screen. Behind it all is a crackle and a rumble. *Eggs and bacon, Eggs and bacon. Apple and custard . . .*

"Been thinking, by the way," he says, leaning against a bookshelf as he admires his camerawork. "About who should replace me as principal at college. We need someone with *reputation,* don't you think? Someone with an agile mind . . . And I don't really think you'll be surprised, Brook, when I tell you that your name was the first that came to mind."

"I'm far too old," I mutter, still gazing at the screen as Christine and Barbara run up to me, their tongues stuck out like gorgeous gargoyles, their whole futures ahead of them. "Far too ill . . ."

"Such a pity," Cumberland says, re-folding his arms, adding just the right note of regret, "even if it were true . . ." But he doesn't push it. In fact, he sounds relieved.

"Anyway," he stoops down, preparing to lift the needle from the record as the matchstick figures dance and shift, grey on white. "Time we got back into the throng, old man." Christine and Barbara dissolve into a flash of light, then shrink down through a pin dot into the blackness. "It's nearly midnight."

The lights are off now in the main room as the bells of Big Ben begin their famous chime. *Bong*—and there it is. *Bong*—a New Year is beginning. Lips and hands press against my own with the rustle of tweed and rayon, the dig of jewelry, wafts of perfume. Afterward, as I'm sipping the sweet fizzy alcohol and thinking of getting back to my tablets, my rooms, the doorbell sounds along the hall. I'm already on my way toward it in the hope that it's my driver come to rescue me when I realize that eager hands are assisting my passage, eager voices are urging me on. The doorbell sounds again. It's clearly some neighbor out first-footing with a piece of shortbread, a lump of coal. And who better than I, the famous Geoffrey Brook, to greet them?

The Cumbernalds' front door swings inward, and I'm expecting a figure, perhaps even the dark handsome stranger of tradition, to be standing on the doorstep. But the doorway remains empty, and I, pushed on, seem to travel into blackness and terrible, empty, cold.

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Nine

I've been reading—or re-reading, I'm really not sure now—that stained copy of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. The curled pages, brittle with dried mud and the dusty air of nearly half a century, speak of nothing that resembles the vision of Greater Britain that came to pass. Morris hated big industry, he hated all big things, he hated terror and injustice. How, then, was his name pulled so deeply into the currents of Modernism that Blackwell's are even now trying to get rid of discounted piles of copies of *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles?* All that Morris and Modernism ever shared was a preparedness to dream, and a love of a bright, clean, glorious past that never was. But perhaps that was enough; perhaps the dream, any dream, is always the seed from which nightmares will follow.

John Arthur is fading. His memory is twisted and pulled to suit whatever meaning people choose to give it as easily as were Morris's unread pages. It's almost as if I'm the only person left in this nation who grieves for him, or who still wishes to understand. And that last fatal night when we were together follows me even now. All the questions I should have asked, the challenges I should have made. Either I loved, I suppose, the incarnation of something evil, or John Arthur was a puppet like me, jerked by the whims of some incomprehensible greater will. Between these two horrors, I keep trying to find some middle way, a decent path that anyone might wander along in their life and find themselves unexpectedly and irrevocably lost. Francis was no monster, for all that I know that he used me much more than he loved me in the brief time that we were truly together.

So I keep thinking instead of Mrs. Stevens, my acquaintance's neighbor, who offered me tea and the bright warmth of her kitchen, and of Cumbernald, and of the woman behind the counter in the Post Office, and the doctors and the policemen, and, yes, of Christlow, and even Reeve-Ellis, and the faces you see looking out from train windows, and the children you see playing in the street. And my own face in the mirror is there, too, although haggard as death now, the stranger-corpse that will soon be all that is left of me. Francis belongs there, with us. He didn't close the cell doors himself, he didn't pull the ropes, touch the wires, kick shut the drawers of filing cabinets.

We all did that for him.

For a few short days of our Scottish holiday, Francis and I lived in a ramshackle stone cottage. The place had a rough slate floor like something carried in by the tide, thick walls with tiny windows that overlooked the beach. In storms, in winter, the thin turf roof would have leaked the sea and the wind and the rain. But the weather was like honey when we were there. The sea was like wine. Alone, miles from the world, we swam naked and caught translucent shrimps from the pools beyond the dunes.

Time stopped. The whole universe turned around us. Francis's skin was browned and bleached to lacy tidemarks by the sea and the sun, and he tasted like the shrimps; briny salt and sweet. Lying one night amid the blankets of our rough cot, my skin stiff from the sun and the soles of my feet gritty, some twist of emptiness made me reach out and open my eyes. Francis had gone from beside me, was standing naked at the open cottage doorway, looking out at the pale sea, the star-shot night.

"You see over there . . . ?" he said, sensing from the change in my breathing that I was awake. "Right over there, Griff, toward the horizon. . . ?"

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I propped myself up, following his gaze out along the white shingle path, the low wall, the pale dunes that edged into the luminous ripple of the waves. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps there was something out there, the shining grey backs of a shoal of islands that daylight made the air too brilliant to see.

"I think we should go there, Griff," he said, his shoulders and limbs rimed with starlight. "Remember? That lovely name . . . ?"

"There won't be anything to see," I laughed, lying back in the blankets. "There'll be no ferry. . . ."

But I could see those islands more clearly now as I closed my eyes again and the darkness began to take me. Heathered hills rolling down to dark green copses of pine. Sheep-dotted lowlands. The summer-sparkling rim of the sea. I could even smell a uniquely milky scent of summer grass and flowers carried to me on the soft breeze from off the Atlantic. Yes, I thought, we will go there.

But the weather had changed in the morning when we awoke. Low grey clouds lay across the dunes and met with the sea. So we never did get to visit the Summer Isles, and Francis pushed quickly down the track as we left our cottage beneath a sky that threatened nothing but rain, cycling fast as he always cycled, forever heading on. I even feared that I, teetering with my older legs as I bumped along with my heavy suitcase strapped behind me, would never catch up. It was then, I think, as he crested the top of the first hill and vanished from sight, freewheeling eagerly down toward the farm on the headland where we would hand in the keys, that I finally lost my Francis. It was then that he was swallowed by history, and that everything else that was to happen began.

Well-anchored in my wheelchair on this steamship's juddering deck, I gaze at those famous white cliffs, as grey on this late January morning as is the sea, the sky, these circling gulls. The air is bitter and cold, filled with the groan of engines and the smoke and salt they churn in their wake. There will be no last glimpse of England—I realize that now—just this gradual fading.

Like so many other things I have done in my life, my departure has proved surprisingly easy. I could detect no resistance as my driver ferried me about Oxford and I withdrew my funds and made my travel arrangements. In any event, the number of stamps and passes required to leave this country are greatly reduced. Back in Oxford, I suppose, Allenby will have found my note by now, and passed it on to Cumbernald as he tidies his desk and prepares to leave. My letter, posted to London the day before, will probably also be waiting for Miss Flood. Of course, there will be concern about my semi-mysterious disappearance, but that will soon be followed by weary, head-shaking amusement at the thought that I still had this one last act in me.

Thus I travel, ill, wealthy, and alone. My precise plans, as the maps and the possibilities widen in my mind, remain vague. Long journeys hold no fears for me now: if you are rich enough, there are always people who will give you what you think you need. All I know is that I want to end my days somewhere far from England where the climate is dry and warm, where there are lizards on the walls and the stars are different. From Calais, I shall continue east and south for as far as this body will take me. First Class, and preferably by train. Preferably by sleeper. ❍

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On Books

Paul Di Filippo

Hopheads

Known for its promulgation of the most extreme viewpoints and its insistence on zero censorship of information, Loompanics Unlimited (POB 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368) now presents us with a comparatively uncontroversial yet thoroughly winning volume: Thom Metzger's *The Birth of Heroin and the Demonization of the Dope Fiend* (trade, $15.00, 221 pages, ISBN 1-55950-177-4). Like Metzger's earlier account of the invention of the electric chair, *Blood and Volts* (1996), this book is deeply researched revisionist history told with utter objectivity. In between its opening line ("God's Own medicine came to America on the Mayflower, landing with the Pilgrims in 1620.") and its matching concluding observation ("[O]piates . . . are not a foreign substance. . . . They were born from, and continue to feed on, the deeply American ideals of purity and pollution."), the reader is treated to an astonishing cavalcade of personalities and facts. Like a blend of Avram Davidson, Isaac Asimov, James Burke, and Will Self, Metzger brings alive the men who gave birth to heroin (the first designer drug?) and those who later vilified it. Such talented monomaniacs as German industrialist Carl Duisberg, American inventor of "heroic therapy" Dr. Benjamin Rush, and Red Scare crusader Mitchell Palmer come fully alive. We trace out heroin's sad transformation from wonder cure-all to cursed plague, learning how subterranean psychological forces sealed its fate. Particularly enlightening is Metzger's analysis of drug iconography. This is a book which Thomas De Quincey would have been proud to endorse.

Heroin now becomes our link to cocaine. Specifically, J. G. Ballard's *Cocaine Nights* (Counterpoint, hardcover, $23.00, 329 pages, ISBN 1-887178-66-X). Greeting us as a slightly warped Chandlerian mystery, by its end Ballard's latest novel becomes a mix of Borges and Frazer (author of *The Golden Bough* [1890]). Would you expect anything less strange from that contrarian slyboots Ballard?

Our narrator is fiftyish travel-writer Charles Prentice, who has journeyed to the Spanish resort town of Estrella de Mar to aid his younger brother Frank. Frank, manager of the high-class yet seamy Club Nautico, has been arrested by the Spanish police on murder charges. One night, before the eyes of the whole village, the Hollinger mansion burned down in an act of arson, killing the five people within, and Frank was implicated. Charles's exculpatory efforts, however, are complicated by Frank's subsequent guilty plea. Still, the loyal brother persists.

At first, Charles is all eager, logical bloodhound. But as he gets glimpses of the rotting underbelly of Estrella de Mar (Vermilion Sands with seafood), as embodied in the messianic tennis-pro Bobby Crawford, Charles finds his quest dissolving. Instead, he comes to embrace the seemingly necessary darkness responsible for his brother's sad fate—a fate mirrored in Charles's own foredoomed ending.

The spiritual teachings of the Manson-like Crawford—a "psychopath as saint"—hark back to some of the old-

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est themes in SF. Crawford eventually convinces Charles that the retirement communities of the Mediterranean—and elsewhere—are tombs for catatonic surplus workers. In the words of the psychiatrist Sanger, actually an opponent to Crawford yet one who agrees with his analysis: "Our governments are preparing us for a future without work. . . . Leisure societies lie ahead of us, like those you see on this coast." Charles summarizes with Orwellian gusto: "A billion balconies facing the sun." Clearly, we are in the familiar territory here of David Keller's "The Revolt of the Pedestrians" or Keith Laumer's "Cocoon." Unfortunately, Crawford's only solution to this mass lobotomization is to reintroduce all the vices and perversions that traditionally enliven the underworld.

One of those opposing Crawford is Dr. Paula Hawkins. Her character is particularly interesting, as the flip side to the evil Dr. Barbara in Ballard's *Rushing to Paradise* (1995). But all the characters exhibit a full quota of that mordant eccentricity so typical of Ballard's creations, best enjoyed in Ballard's signature vatic dialogue.

Film is an important motif in this book, and Ballard's presentation itself is stunningly cinematic. Like *Chinatown* (1974) as if filmed by Antonioni, or *The Big Sleep* (1946) perhaps transfigured by Fellini, *Cocaine Nights* mixes a cannibal pot of European angst and hard-boiled sleaze, seasoned with the body of the visiting anthropologist.

My own reading of Ballard has been deepened by a recent critical volume written by Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $39.95, 213 pages, ISBN 0-312-17439-X). Viewing Ballard as the hinge between "mutually exclusive constituencies," Luckhurst systematically illustrates how Ballard's work fails to be bounded by any one genre, but instead derives its strength from the tug between opposing worldviews. Nicely organized, cleanly—albeit densely—written, insightful and wry, this is the kind of book that gives criticism a good name.

Jesters

I first encountered the work of British writer Steve Aylett in the feisty, millennially themed UK anthology *Disco 2000* (Sceptre, trade, £6.99, 364 pages, ISBN 0-340-70771-2), edited by Sarah Champion. Aylett's entry there, titled "Gigantic," tells of the appearance of humongous UFOs above every world capital at century's end, in fulfillment of the predictions of engagingly loony Professor Skychum. The bay doors of the invaders eventually open—to disgorge upon the hapless populace the rotting corpse of every person murdered in the whole twentieth century.

The mad conceit and off-kilter prose even of this startling piece, however, failed to prepare me for Aylett's *Slaughtermatic* (Four Walls Eight Windows, trade, $13.95, 152 pages, ISBN 1-56858-103-3). I have not laughed so hard at such a witty book since the babysitter tossed a copy of *Naked Lunch* (1959) into my crib. This is Aylett's first novel to reach the US, and one hopes his prior two books, *The Crime Studio* and *Bigot Hall*, will make an appearance here soon.

The nonstop action of *Slaughtermatic*—centering around a bank heist that involves time travel, doppelgängers, and a legendary book by one Eddie Gamete, a Kilgore Trout analogue—takes place in the chaos-devolved US city of Beerlight, "a blown circuit, where to kill a man was less a murder than a mannerism." Following the exploits of thought criminals Dante Cubit, The Entropy Kid, and Rosa Control (who

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bears a kinship with Moorcock's Rose von Bek), along with their various antagonists and sidekicks, this novel is not only conceptually brilliant and satirically walloping, but stylistically innovative. Let me give you the barest teaser:

> "Here's the wire on Mr. Dante Hinton Cubit," Specter announced, scrolling the file. "Nationality—Illinoid. Handicap—white. Religion—fetish orthodox. Weighs in at twenty-five years. Father died in a voting accident. Mother missing, presumed skinned and salted."

What Aylett has done is synthesize every great anarchic comic voice of the twentieth century into one uniquely his own. From Ishmael Reed to Woody Allen, the Marx Brothers to Firesign Theater, Robert Coover to Mark Leyner, Lance Olsen to Monty Python, Aylett has drawn threads of doubletalk and overkill. The result is like listening to Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" as interpreted by Neal Cassady. Just when you think he's exhausted a riff, Aylett piles on more absurdities, proving that genius means never knowing when to stop.

This book is either a boffo prose poem or a transcendent obscene phone call. You decide.

It takes a gonzoid like Aylett to make the outrageous David Prill appear understated. Yet in his third novel, *Second Coming Attractions* (St. Martin's Press, hardcover, $22.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-312-18173-6), Prill delivers a book which, while still blasphemously hilarious, seems to me a bit quieter than his first two, *The Unnatural* (1995) and *Serial Killer Days* (1996). Dare one use the horrible word "mature" here?

The premise this time around does not invert our familiar world in the same way Prill's earlier gimmicks—competitive embalming and institutionalized serial murder—turned consensus reality topsy-turvy. We are in our familiar world, but a subset thereof: the world of Christian filmmaking. Good Samaritan Films—a Speck family business: father Noah, son Leviticus, daughter Evie—produces low-budget inspirational films. Operating since the fifties, they have reached a contemporary crisis. Their old-fangled stars and plots are no longer acceptable to many modern Christians. It seems that a vicious streak has developed in their audience, which prefers the shocking anti-abortion documentaries produced by Blood of the Lamb Pictures. This core conflict set up, Prill proceeds to have some major fun. Will Jesus portrayer Rick Bible enact a believable Crucifixion? Will the latest Blood of the Lamb atrocity, *The Fetal Detective*, bury Good Samaritan once and for all? Will ex-Jesus Rance Jericho get asked for his autograph at the package store? Only God knows.

Told mostly through the viewpoint of Leviticus, *Second Coming Attractions*, beneath its clever japes ("Good Samaritan wasn't on the lips of those who spoke in tongues."), offers a perceptive portrait of colliding belief systems. The guileless and good-natured Leviticus comes off not as a prejudiced fool but as an honest, open-minded common man, a seeker. In this Prill suddenly begins to converge toward James Blaylock.

Like a Chick pamphlet written by Ron Goulart or an episode of *Davey and Goliath* filmed by Ed Wood, *Second Coming Attractions* offers all the heavenly guidance you can use.

David Bowman's first novel, *Let the Dog Drive* (1993) reminded me of Scott Bradfield's *The History of Luminous Motion* (1989): a ruefully manic hegira across an American landscape littered with canine crashtest victims, missiles of flying

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fruit, dissatisfied women, blowhard men, and disaffected children. My one quibble: the sardonic depth-charges of this debut exploded in relatively shallow thematic puddles. So it's a kick to report that in his second book, *Bunny Modern* (Little, Brown, hardcover, $21.95, 215 pages, ISBN 0-316-10281-4), the easy chuckles of *Dog* have been tempered into something finer. In this near-future satire, Bowman manages to evoke feelings of honest angst over vital matters (the rigors of parenting, an individual's responsibility to civilization) without sacrificing the big laughs. Think Douglas Coupland crossed with Philip José Farmer, David Foster Wallace seasoned with Frederic Brown, Matt Ruff meets Jonathan Lethem.

Bowman plunges us quickly into his multiplexed future of 2021. Electricity has vanished, the morphological resonance theories of Rupert Sheldrake have been proved true, sleepers only dream twice a year, fashionable clothing known as Lit Wear replicates classic books across people's bodies, the human birthrate has plummeted, and the few remaining babies are protected by drug-snuffling, gun-toting nannies who make Louise Woodward resemble Mary Poppins. Plainly, Bowman is not following the old Wellsian dictum for extrapolation of "changing one thing only." But that's because Bowman is a true postmodern ("more postmodern than Reagan," as one simile here describes a character). And one of the hallmarks of postmodernism is affection for both old and new forms, employing both to achieve something fresh. This explains why Bowman can simultaneously project nostalgia for our own vanished era and fascination with his nuttily credible gaslit future. Refreshingly, this is a post-catastrophe story in which the characters build shrines to their past creature comforts (an electric pencil sharpener adorned with flowers) rather than curse the names of their gloriously wasteful ancestors.

Our narrator is an fortyish ex-actor named Dylan, born in the era before electricity disappeared. Fixated on a nanny named Clare and her current charge, a mysteriously unchanging baby named Soda Lindy, Dylan will endure much abuse—not a little from Clare and her mad employer, Kathleen Keegan—to unriddle the mystery of Soda and win the love of Clare. His voice a mix of (Bob) Dylanesque metaphors, cinematic tropes, and Hammettesque hard-boiled diction, Dylan takes us gleefully through the ghostly streets of decimated Manhattan and into the birth of a renewed world.

If the image of a lethal shootout in Washington Square between a posse of Vengence-snorting nannies and a pack of book-editors-cum-kidnappers fails to jostle your funnybone, then you are simply not juiced enough to dwell in the gaudy nursery of *Bunny Modern*.

Dataghosts

Let us imagine an alternate history for SF. An elderly and respected Edgar Allen Poe becomes editor of a magazine called *Arabesque Stories*, circa 1875. From his pulpit, he promotes a new kind of tale called "Symbolist Fiction," modeled on his own crepuscular work. A host of brilliant writers from many countries—Machen, Beardsley, Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Hodgson, Bierce—flock to his banner. Over the next few decades, Poe's brand of SF, now represented by dozens of magazines, becomes the dominant mode of the fantastic, incorporating scientific speculation as well as more Gothic material. (There are schisms and feuds, of course, over this latter development.) Clark Ashton Smith, Ben Hecht, Fritz Lieber, and numer-

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ous others push the genre forward in the twenties, thirties, and forties of our century. By the time the 1990s roll around, nearly 125 years of Symbolist Fiction have culminated in one writer. And his name is Richard Calder.

Postulating this imaginary tradition seems the most natural way to get a handle on what Calder is doing in his newest novel, *Cythera* (St. Martin's Press, hardcover, $23.95, 230 pages, ISBN 0-312-18074-8). While Calder expertly uses speculative elements in our familiar SF way, his primary concerns are the mannerist depiction of rarefied emotional states verging on the otherworldly. In fact, this stylistic and thematic approach becomes the actual foregrounded subject matter here.

We are back in the world of Calder's *Dead Girls* (1992) trilogy, that continuum of deadly Cartier love-droids, but early in the timeline, before the ontological weirdness really gets heavy. Consequently, the action depicted here is always straightforward and mimetic, despite its mauve cloak of baroque prose. Part One is narrated by a man who calls himself by various names, including Captain Tarquin. Across the colonized continent of Antarctica in the year 2036, Tarquin drives his Bentley, accompanied by a nymphet ghost. Dhalia Chan, chopsocky bad girl modeled on a real actress, who has leaked across from the virtual fibresphere and taken up illegal nanoflesh. Hounded by the authorities, Tarquin and Dhalia flee from one sleazy dive to another, until finally only a peculiarly promising death offers escape.

In Part Two our narrator is Mosquito, once a transgendered assassin but now a mere catspaw of the Thai pornqueen Kito. Soon Mosquito's path intersects with the reborn Tarquin and Dhalia. The trio conceives a mad plan to leave behind Earth's dominion for the nascent paradise of Cythera in orbit around another star. But this quest first involves a sidetrip to Greece.

Part Three finds the story resumed by Michael Flynn (definitely *not* the *Analog* writer), the elderly film director who built the legend of Dhalia Chan. Now in a concentration camp on the Greek island of Kithara with the actress named Jaruwan who modeled Dhalia (in effect, Flynn and Jaruwan are Dhalia's spiritual parents), Flynn believes that neither the fibresphere nor Earth represent ultimate reality. His conception of a higher plane of existence which he also terms Cythera is in contention with the notions of the others. Whose dream will prevail? Perhaps both, perhaps neither.

Calder's impassioned passages describing Cythera—a place that allows "the reconciliation of . . . opposites, the hard-boiled world with the fairytale, the *noir* with a world of impossible romanticism"—are the real reason for this novel's existence. His depiction of this common human longing for Cockaigne, the land of milk and honey and consequenceless pleasure, and how this repressed emotion known as *sehnsucht* drives our every action, culminates in Flynn's final experiences at death's door.

Sex, sadism, symbolism, and *sehnsucht*: in *Cythera*, Richard Calder proves that the "S" in SF can stand for many more things than we commonly assume.

In Greg Egan's *Diaspora* (Orion, hardcover, £16.99, 295 pages, ISBN 1-85798-438-2/HarperPrism, hardcover, $23.00, 290 pages, ISBN 0-061-05281-7), the inhabitants of an advanced cyberspace known as the Coalition of Polises could not be further removed from Calder's erotomaniacal delinquents. Sober, responsible, inventive, curious, disdainful of "flesher" humanity, these virtual, virtuous incarnations inhabit a

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world more arid than Calder's festering universe. Where Calder's cyberspace is all garishly painted canvas, Egan's is blueprinted with near-buildability (this is the kind of SF where frequent reference to a glossary of scientific terms is demanded of the reader). Yet in the end, both books are about the Panshinian search for transcendence. It's just that in Calder, the characters follow their gaudy dreams, while in Egan they follow the sterile footprints of subatomic particles.

Diaspora opens in the year 2975. On Earth, most of humanity has gone digital, either in subterranean, shielded "scapes" that offer utterly faithful emulation of anything imaginable, or embodied in Gleisner robot bodies. The few flesh and blood humans left are either old-form "statics" or engineered "exuberants." For the most part, these living relics are ignored by the digitized beings. However, this Eloi/Morlock division is about to end. New astronomical findings convince the polises that a gamma-ray burst from 100 light years away is about to purge Earth's biosphere. Fleshers must enter the polises or die cruelly.

This first crisis—and how calmly Egan and his citizens face it is an example of how mentally alien digitized humanity has become—has a larger impact: the Diaspora is begun. Traveling at slower-than-light speeds, the Gleisners and the cloned polises will search the galaxy for answers to their future survival chances. Over the next several millennia, Stapledonian transfigurations and Clarkean tours of natural wonders will accrue, until, in a final logarithmic expansion, our main protagonist, Yatima, will climb through innumerable levels of the multiverse, only to come face to face with his earliest dreams.

Out of all of Egan's novels, this book has to be the driest. Capable in previous works of depicting gut-wrenching human dilemmas, Egan chooses here to derive his excitement from sentences such as "Networks in his new visual cortex and spatial map attached a raw perceptual distinction to the hyperal directions, but it still required a conscious effort to make cognitive sense of them.' (Not to say that *Diaspora* is humorless: Egan's notion that wormholes when discovered, will be tubes exactly as long and slow as the regular cosmic distance between their endpoints, is a sly rejoinder to standard SF use of these miracle transport devices.) Such discourse will not be to everyone's taste, but Egan is upfront about his bias for rationalism: "*Conquering the galaxy* [italics the author's] is what bacteria with spaceships would do—knowing no better having no choice."

If your paradigm matches Egan's, you'll find wonders aplenty here presented in an icily brilliant fashion.

Priestkings

The ease with which Tim Powers splices the themes and characters from two previously discrete novels of his—*Last Call* (1992) and *Expiration Date* (1996)—into his latest *Earthquake Weather* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 414 pages, ISBN 0-312-86163-X), bears witness to both his ingenuity and his unity of vision. The world as seen through Powersanian eyes is characterized by a commonality of weirdness. *Your* puzzle piece without a seeming purpose might very well complement *my* developing picture. Not that either of us will necessarily understand the completed image; in fact, viewing it might change us forever, even kill us. But at least we helped each other toward the necessary revelation.

Last Call revealed that America had long been ruled on an ethereal plane by a succession of mortal Fisher Kings. In Las Vegas, after many

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dangerous machinations, the crown passed to one Scott Crane. Taking place in LA, *Expiration Date* detailed a world of ghosts, shambling psychic residue sought by various factions for assorted reasons. Teenager Koot Hoomie Parganas became inadvertent host to a powerful spirit, that of Thomas Edison, and was subjected to much peril, losing his birth parents and gaining adoptive ones along the way, Pete and Angelica Sullivan.

The intersection of these two worlds occurs thusly: two years after the events of *Expiration Date*, Scott Crane has relocated to California to an estate named Leucadia, from which he benignly rules, insuring local prosperity. Until, that is, Crane is murdered on the first day of a new year by Janis Plumtree, a multiple personality randomly ruled by the ghost of her father, Omar Salvoy, a frustrated contender for the Fisher King post. Upon Crane's death, some distance away, Kootie's perpetually bleeding wound begins to flow more freely. Is he to be the next Fisher King? Not if Arky Mavranos's plan to revive the only partially dead Scott Crane succeeds. Swept up in these schemes is a local vintner named Sid "Scant" Cochran, a man marked since childhood by Dionysus, the god now shown as the ultimate power behind all ghosts and Fisher Kings. Pursued by a ghost-eating psychiatrist named Dr. Armentrout and his murderous allies, the communards of Lever Blank, the ragtag army of the two uneasily linked kings will face numerous spiritual and physical trials before the explosive final night of arcane sacrifices.

Although the characters from the previous books continue to be fully fleshed and vital, this novel really belongs to newcomers Plumtree and Cochran. Only they are granted the kind of inner monologue used by Powers to confer depth, much in the manner in which Phil Dick enlivened his most sympathetic people. Although I rather missed sharing Kootie's point of view at first, I quickly became entranced by the awkward love affair between Cochran and Plumtree. Powers never makes Plumtree's mental disorders cute, but instead depicts with harrowing intensity exactly how cruel such a condition would be.

In a Thorne Smith homage, and in accordance with a book ruled by Dionysus, Powers has his characters almost continually drunk or in the process of becoming drunk. The wine motif here (Powers weaves together numerous legends and historical incidents into a cryptic conspiracy of the grape) also harks back interestingly to Powers's own *The Drawing of the Dark* (1979) and its beer lore. Bolstered by Dickens and Shakespeare quotes that manage to sound more like Chambers's *The King in Yellow* (1895) than Bard or Boz, this conspiratorial dimension adds a timelessness to the present-day travails of the cast.

When Cochran eventually comes into the presence of his vine-god, he hears "a melody . . . bright and almost sprightly, wafting with a forlorn insouciance around a core of nostalgic despair." That's *Earthquake Weather* in a bottle.

Talemongers

The absurdist stories in Mark McLaughlin's *Feeding the Glamour Hogs* (Ministry of Whimsy, chapbook, $4.75, 56 pages, ISBN 1-890-46401-5) stand shoulder to shoulder with the work of Carol Emshwiller, David Bunch, Don Webb, and Barrington Bayley. Filled with sentient shoes, horny VCRs, mysterious rays and malign film documentaries, McLaughlin's tales are laugh-out-loud assaults on consensus reality. And if his "Adroitly Wrapped" is not the next Tim Burton movie, someone will have blown an Oscar.

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Here's a secret about the stories of Spider Robinson: conventionally spoken of as hard-nosed SF, they are fairy tales at heart. Beneath what often seems to be a near-Heinlein texture, Robinson's tales are utterly fabulaic, tugging more at heartstrings than grey matter. Perhaps this stems from Robinson's avowed idolization of Sturgeon, who, though he could pilot a bulldozer with the best of them, was never exactly a slide-rule-toting, buzz-cut engineer. In any case, the foregoing analysis does not preclude Robinson from achieving some fine effects, nor does it interfere with your enjoyment. In *User Friendly* (Baen Books, mass-market, $5.99, 282 pages, ISBN 0-671-87864-6), you'll find a varied mix of pastiche, non-fiction, and thought experiments. My favorite: "The Magnificent Conspiracy," which uncovers global remedies in a used-car lot.

For pure Sturgeon, consider *Thunder and Roses* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $25.00, 380 pages, ISBN 1-55643-252-6), the fourth volume in the ongoing compilation of Sturgeon's short fiction. Here we find Sturgeon's first foray into Westerns ("Well Spiced"), a perhaps precedent-setting usage of the Berserker spaceship trope ("There Is No Defense"), and a horror story as chilling as the earlier "It" ("The Professor's Teddy Bear"). The standout piece by my lights is "Hurricane Trio," which opens—*sans* explanation—with a man, his wife, and a second woman sharing a darkened bedroom while a storm rages outside. This compelling story proceeds to drag the astonished reader through the characters' alien-abetted emotional turmoil. Another standout volume in this important series.

I'd call Kit Reed an elder stateswoman of SF, were she not so youthful, vital, and sardonic. Her newest collection, *Weird Women, Wired Women* (Wesleyan University Press, trade, $16.95, 214 pages, ISBN 0-819-52255-4), is a perfect introduction to her work, capturing stories from her entire career. From the fifties pod-paranoia of "The Wait" to the nineties mall-rat confusion of "Whoever," Reed unflaggingly addresses the human condition, subset womankind.

Paul McAuley's superior assemblage *The Invisible Country* (Gollancz, mass-market, £5.99, 319 pages, ISBN 0-575-60189-2) looks both backward and forward. Several stories tie into the ribofunky near-future of McAuley's *Fairyland* (1995), while one—"Recording Angel"—is an attachment to his newest series, *Confluence*. Supplied with insightful afterwords, this passel of stories exhibits McAuley's trademark qualities of compression, compassion, speculative daring, and cinematic *élan*. "Slaves," which has previously appeared only in on-line form, closes this volume on a strong note of earned transcendence.

Which writer of the fantastic has had a career spanning debut publication in the twenties through continuing appearances in the nineties? If you answered Jack Williamson, you'd be only half right. That master of ghastly tales named Hugh Cave also fits the bill. Selling his first piece in 1929, Cave amassed more than 800 sales by the time the pulp market crumbled. After a couple of decades away from our field, Cave returned in the seventies and has never left again. A massive career retrospective is now available from the meticulous folks at Fedogan & Bremer: *The Door Below*, hardcover, $27.00, 332 pages, ISBN 1-878252-30-5). Well worth your dollar, this book exhibits Cave in all his early lurid pulp vigor, as well as in his more mature phases. Earthy and hard-boiled, possessing a worldly knowledge of such exotic locales as Haiti and Jamaica, Cave could slide

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from Jim Thompson to Robert Bloch at will. Yet he also penetrated to "subtleties of human nature that none of us understands until thrust face to face with the supreme moment."

Like a cross between Haruki Murakami and Jorge Amado, Brian Evenson delivers seventeen outré tales in his *The Din of Celestial Birds* (Wordcraft, trade, $10.95, 152 pages, ISBN 1-877655-24-4). Set in a strange country, mostly around the polymorphously perverse city of Labaise, these stories depict in severe yet colorful prose the arcane fates that befall the generally luckless inhabitants of Evenson's nameless country. "The Dead Child" is exemplary: a mourning mother cuts an unwise deal with a brujo who fashions the corpse of her child into a golem-like substitute. The lessons learned, in this story and the others, are eerie and pathos-laden.

S. Fowler Wright lived from 1874 to 1965 and was a pivotal figure in SF during the twenties, thirties, and forties. A prolific writer of prodigious talents, he exhibited a Swiftian, Shavian voice which you can now sample in *S. Fowler Wright's Short Stories* (FSB, £12.50, trade, 216 pages, ISBN 1-900848-00-7). Remarkably prescient about information theory, cybernetics, media saturation, and biology, these stories entertain as effectively as ever. "The Rat" condenses in a few pages all the pros and cons of immortality, and "Automata" points toward much Hard SF in the Baxter vein.

Although not overtly fantastical, the stories in Thomas Kennedy's *Drive, Dive, Dance & Fight* (BkMk Press, trade, $14.95, 152 pages, ISBN 1-886157-14-6) all tremble on the edge of mystical unveilings. Characters pushed to their limits by broken love affairs or simple daily pressures all achieve their glimpses of painful wisdom. With hints of John Shirley and Tom Disch, Barry Malzberg and J. D. Salinger, Kennedy pirouettes and punches, descends and burns rubber, every move radiating grace and heft.

Insightful, affecting, non-dogmatic fantasy stories featuring non-heterosexual characters: this shorthand description hides as much as it reveals, at least when discussing Lawrence Schimel's *The Drag Queen of Elfland* (Circlet Press, trade, $10.95, 175 pages, ISBN 1-885865-17-1). Honest and direct in both his fiction and his accompanying notes, Schimel skillfully transports his readers into imaginary worlds where a transvestite can assume the throne of Faery, provoking disgust from the elvish courtiers, and female werewolves manage all-night bookstores. Oscar Wilde meets de Camp and Pratt.

Jim Turner's Golden Gryphon Press offers a superb collection as its second publication: *The Moon Maid* (hardcover, $22.95, 275 pages, ISBN 0-965590-18-6), eight stories by R. García y Robertson. Readers of this magazine should recognize García y Robertson's name as a signpost advertising intelligent speculation, actionful narratives, and historical verisimilitude. Whether he's writing steampunk, as in "Four Kings and an Ace," Turtledovish adventure as in "Gypsy Trade," an Andersonian Norse myth in the manner of "The Wagon God's Wife," or a de Camp-like, Krishna-style adventure such as "Gone to Glory," this author is always in tight control of his material, while retaining a vivacious playfulness too often lacking in today's SF.

Mike Resnick, wearing his editor's cap, has fulfilled a thirty-year-old dream. In 1960, upon seeing an article in *Playboy* entitled "Girls for the Slime God" by William Knowles, Resnick was moved to seek out the early pulp stories of Henry Kuttner which had inspired Knowles' gentle mockery. Now in one volume—*Girls*

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for the Slime God (Obscura Press, trade, $15.00, 216 pages, ISBN 0-965956-90-3)—Resnick gathers the Knowles piece, three Kuttner gems ("Avengers of Space," "Dictator of the Americas," and "The Time Trap") as well as a linked Asimov story, "Playboy and the Slime God," to form a rousing compendium of BEMs and bra-straps. The core Kuttner pieces are like attending a Bettie Page photoshoot helmed by Basil Wolverton. This much fun is never out of style.

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"Honey, . . . It's the Ice Age"

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SF Conventional Calendar

For WorldCons, NASFiC, and Labor Day cons, see last issue. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 1998

10–13—**Poland Nat'l. Con.** For info, write: **c/o Podlaskie Towartzystwo Milosnikow Fantastyki, ul. Piatowska 11a Bialystok 15-207, Poland.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Bialystok Poland (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: none announced. "SF & wine festival" follows.

11–13—**FantasyCon.** Albany Hotel, Birmingham UK. Freda Warrington, Jane Yolen. UK Fantasy Society annual meet.

17–20—**ShoreCon, 2432 Steiner Rd., Lakehurst NJ 08733. (732) 657-3311.** Hilton, Cherry Hill NJ. Gaming, media and SF.

18–20—**NotJustAnotherCon, c/o SCUM, Box 16, Student Union, Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.** Campus Center Hotel.

18–20—**MosCon, Box 9622, Moscow ID 83843. (509) 332-3848.** University Inn Best Western. K. J. Anderson, Moesta.

18–21—**DiscworldCon, 25 High St. #35, Romford RMI IJL, UK. (01708) 440-145.** Adelphi, Liverpool. Pratchett, Langford.

25–27—**ConTact, Box 3894, Evansville IN 47737. (AOL) contactsf.** Airport Holiday Inn. F. Pohl, L. Reynolds, B. Breuer.

25–27—**Arcana, Box 8036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408.** Joe Lansdale. Dark fantasy and horror.

25–27—**AlbaCon, F 1/2, 10 Atlas Rd., Springburn, Glasgow G21 4TE, UK. (0141) 558-2862.** Central Hotel. Harryhausen.

26–28—**InConSequential, #403-527 Beaverbrook Ct., Fredericton NB E3B 1X6. (506) 452-7479.** Beaverbrook. D. Feintuch.

OCTOBER 1998

1–4—**BoucherCon, 507 S. 8th St., Philadelphia PA 19147. (215) 923-0211.** Wyndham Franklin Plaza. World Mystery Con.

1–4—**Death Equinoxe, Box 581, Denver CO 80201.** Sheraton, Lakewood CO. K. W. Jeter, Misha, Ivan Stang, Ed Bryant.

2–4—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. (314) 326-3026.** Gateway Center, Collinsville IL. Hogan, Cook, Sies, Novak.

2–4—**ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 878-6824.** Harley. L. Niven, K. K. Rusch, Dean Wesley Smith.

2–4—**ConChord, Box 61172, Pasadena CA 91116.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. Wessels, Mar, Simmons. SF/fantasy folksinging.

2–4—**ConCept/Boreal, Box 405, Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1. (514) 381-4162.** Days Inn. R. Sawyer, Meynard, Ackerman.

2–4—**Neko-Con Ichi, Box 11582, Blacksburg VA 24062.** Holiday Inn, Virginia Beach VA. Kitazume, DeJesus. Anime.

2–4—**Viable Paradise, Box 3404, Oak Bluffs MA 02557.** Martha's Vineyard MA. Watt-Evans, Nielsen Haydens, Jael.

9–11—**AlbaCon (US), Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. (518) 456-5242.** Ramada, Schenectady. Friesner, Jael, Mayhew, Asaro.

9–11—**Rising Star, 545 Howard Dr., Salem VA 24153. (540) 389-9400.** Glenvar High School. Gerard, Clement, Lund.

9–11—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (E-mail) constell@traveller.com.** Resnick, Powers, Eggleton, D. Miller.

9–11—**Maritime SF Festival, Box 46021, Halifax NS B3K 5V8. (800) 622-6199.** Trade Center. Duane, Morwood, Llewellyn.

9–11—**Ohio Valley Filk Festival, Box 20125, Columbus OH 43220.** Wyndham, Dublin OH. J. Kare. SF/fantasy folksinging.

9–11—**Anime Weekend, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. (404) 364-9773. (E-mail) awa@anime.net.** Marriott North Central.

9–11—**HispaCon, BEM, Box 6092, Valladolid 47080, Spain. (E-mail) bemjmo@filnet.es.** Valencia, Spain. Spain national con.

9–11—**ConQuest, Box 1376, Brisbane 4001, Australia.** Mercure. Peter Jurasik, W. Koenig, Richard Arnold. Star Trek.

9–11—**Voyage (to the Bottom of the Sea) in Person, 26 Milner Rd., Horfield, Bristol BS7 9PQ, UK.** Novotel, Sheffield UK.

11—**Creation, 664A W. Broadway, Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0960.** Marriott, New York NY. Commercial media event.

16–18—**ConClave, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (E-mail) conclave@hamjudo.com.** Holiday Inn S., Lansing MI. Friesner.

16–18—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244. (E-mail) icon23@sfils.org.** Clarion, Coralville IA. C. de Lint, F. J. Ackerman.

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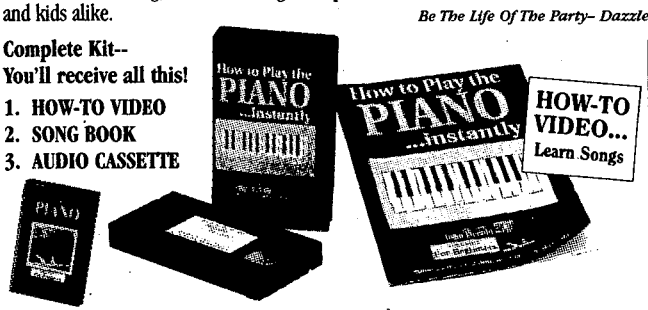
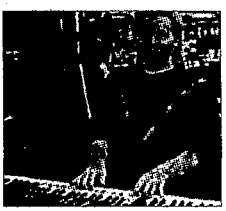

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NEXT ISSUE

HOLIDAY CHEER

Well, our December issue is up next, and, in keeping with tradition, we'll bring you a Christmas Story, a sly, slick, wry, and savvy one, as Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly** hustles us along with a crew of diplomats, bodyguards, and general-purpose minders trying to keep up with a rambunctious alien on a whirlwind tour through a shopping mall, and trying to deal as well with the potentially grave interstellar implications of "Fruitcake Theory." Kelly—who does seem obsessed with Christmas, although there's no truth at all to the rumor that he's taking a job as a department-store Santa this year—also joins forces with writer and poet **Robert Frazier** to bring you a Christmas POEM as well, a bittersweet look back at some bygone days of glory and ahead to a bright new future, called "Eating the Mystery."

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

But if you're more likely to say "Bah, Humbug" than "Ho Ho Ho," don't worry, because, after that, the rest of our issue turns sharply away from seasonal concerns. Our cover story, for instance, by **William Barton**, author of the popular story "Age of Aquarius," takes us to the frozen moons of Saturn, and to a time when the human race has been backed into the tightest of tight corners and on the verge of extinction, for a compelling and somberly lyrical study of how flickers of light and hope can sometimes show up from the most unexpected of sources, at the blackest of times, even when you're "Down in the Dark." Then **Tony Daniel**, whose 1996 novella "The Robot's Twilight Companion" was one of our most acclaimed stories, brings us an exciting and pyrotechnic new novella, taking us to a bizarre far-future world peopled with some of the strangest characters you're ever likely to meet (many of them transhuman, with vast, almost godlike, powers and abilities; some of them—such as a sentient ferret—not even remotely human), a world poised on the brink of a war that may destroy it utterly, for a vivid, fast-paced, exotic adventure that revolves around the "Grist" that joins people together—and sometimes makes it difficult to tell where one ends and another begins! National Book Award-winner **Lisa Goldstein** pulls aside the curtain to look at the forces that actually run the universe, in a charming and magical report on "The Game This Year." **Robert Reed** takes us back to school for some profound and surprising lessons about what you really need to know when you're "Building the Building of the World." And Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** (writing with son **Sean Swanwick**, who is making his *Asimov's* debut) welcomes us aboard for an eccentric, imaginative, and hugely entertaining Grand Tour of the Solar System, in "Archaic Planets: Nine Excerpts from the Encyclopedia Galactica."

EXCITING FEATURES

But that's not all, for our December issue also features some exciting non-fiction as well, as **Robert Silverberg**'s "Reflections" column peers into the depths of the ocean and asks the question, "Hast Seen the White Whale?"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstand (if you can't find it there, please see p. 171) on October 20, 1998, or subscribe today (speaking of the Holiday Season, a subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great Christmas gift, too! You can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our new *Asimov's* Internet website, at **www.asimovs.com**), and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in future issues!

COMING SOON

Another year of Cutting Edge, Top-of-the-Line, State-of-the-Art stories by **Allen Steele, L. Timmel Duchamp, R. Garcia y Robertson, William Barton, Lois Tilton, Brian Stableford, Robert Reed, Eleanor Arnason, Michael Swanwick, Rick Shelley, Kage Baker, Eliot Fintushel, Tom Purdom, Nisi Shawl**, and many others.

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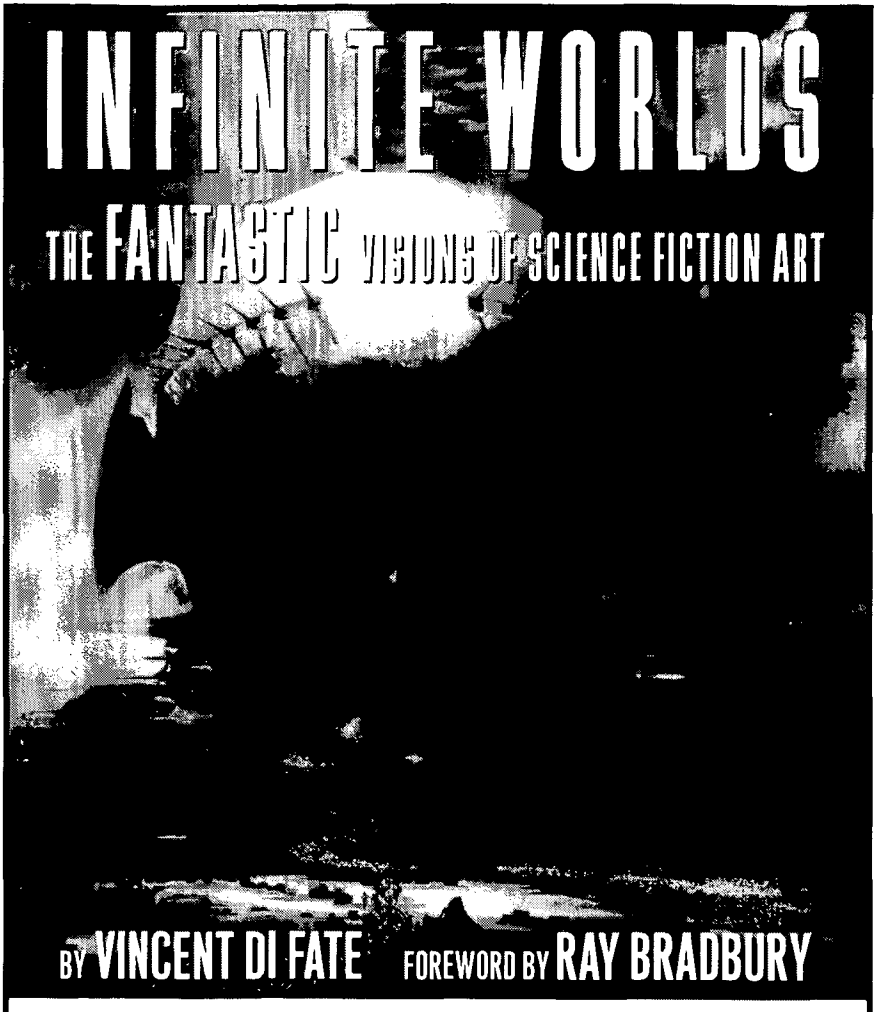

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